DOUBLE ISSUE

MARCH 1994

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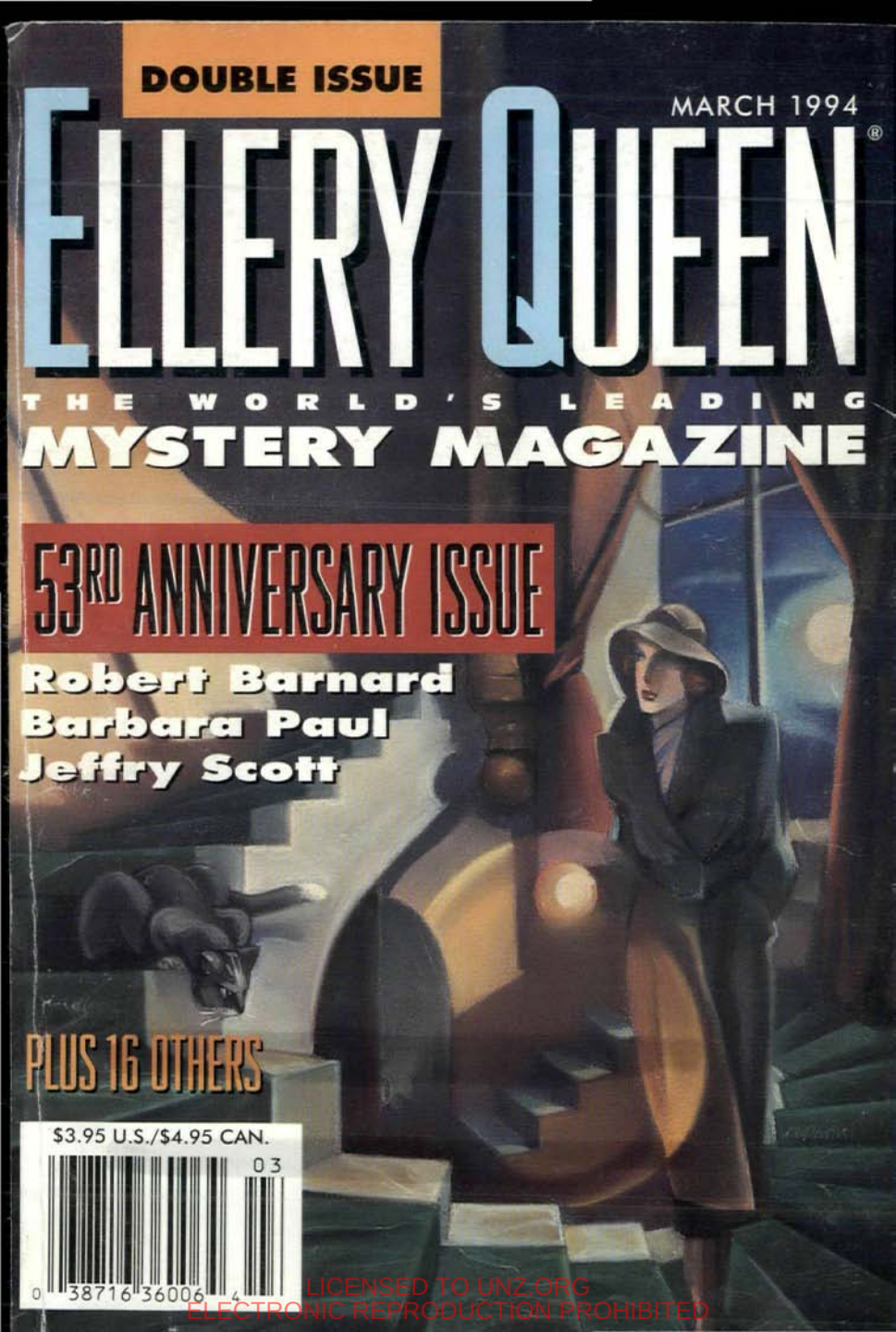
THE WORLD'S LEADING

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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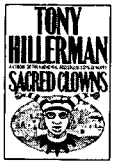

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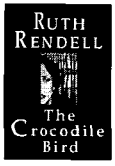

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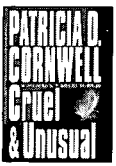

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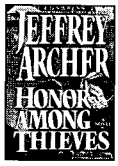

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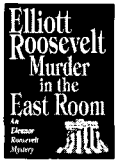

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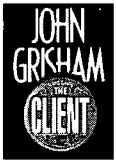

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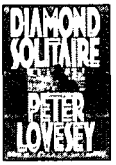

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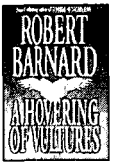

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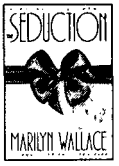

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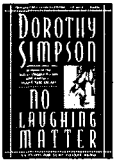

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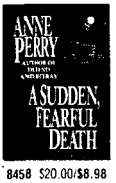

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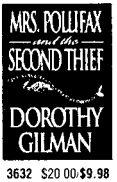

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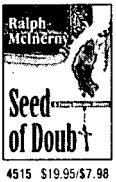

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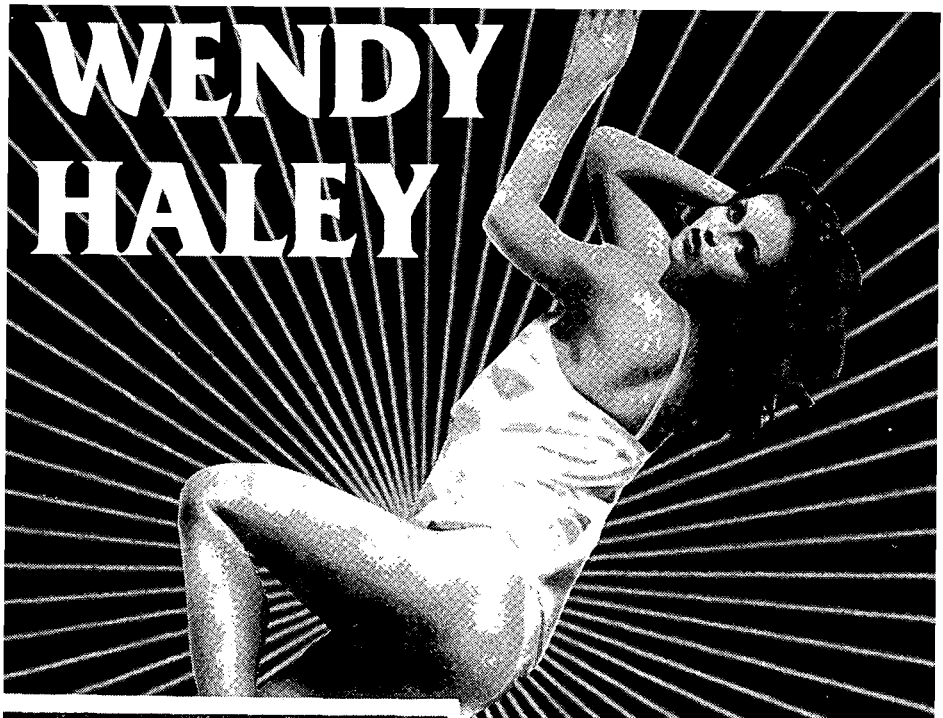

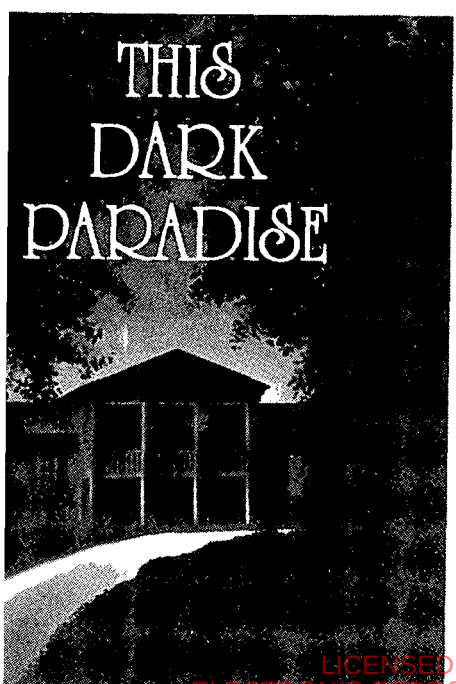

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

A former professor of English Literature, Robert Barnard still devotes time to literary pursuits outside his own writing. Together with his wife Louise, he has served for several years on the Council of the Brontë Society, where one of their concerns has been the preservation of the Brontë parsonage and grounds in Haworth, England. Mr. Barnard's short stories frequently employ historical settings, as does this one, set just after World War I . . .

SOLDIER, FROM THE WARS RETURNING

by ROBERT BARNARD

I have a photograph of my grandfather—my real grandfather—in the uniform of the King's Own Yorkshiremen, taken on leave in 1917, when he had finished his weeks of training and was about to be sent to France. He gazes out into the camera—young, confident, even cocky. I have been told that young soldiers were encouraged to have such pictures taken, ostensibly on the grounds that they encouraged smartness and pride in the regiment, in fact because their officers suspected that the photograph would soon be all that the family had to remember them by.

But this was not the case with my grandfather, Jimmy Larkins. He bucked the statistics. He served in France and Belgium for eighteen months and only sustained a minor wound in the final push of the autumn of 1918. He also survived the flu epidemic of 1919, that final dirty trick of the President of the Immortals. On his demob he got a job as a baker's roundsman in his hometown of Armley, and he put the war behind him.

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On the surface, at least. I do not believe that any normally sensitive person could go through those hellish years entirely unchanged. He had not sunk, suffocating, into the mud, he had not been shot as he clambered over the ridge of his trench, but he had seen hundreds who had, had known them. What Jimmy Larkins would have been like if he had grown up normally in peacetime no one can now know. As it was, he seems to have come home with an urge to make up for lost time, perhaps even to live a little for the lads who had not come home.

And there were plenty of women and girls in the Armley area who were willing to help him do it: women whose husbands had not come home, girls whose potential husbands were remembered collectively on Armistice Day, women whose husbands had come home crippled or haunted—and, indeed, women whose husbands followed the normal northern working-class tradition that the husband's leisure time was spent boozing with his mates while his wife stayed home to cook, clean, and mind the children. There were lonely, unhappy, dissatisfied women aplenty in Jimmy Larkins's Armley, and he did his best to bring a little joy into their lives. It was rumoured that at moments of climax he would cry "That's one from Archie Hoddle!" or "That's for you, Robbie Robson!"—all the names of mates of his who had never come home from France to sow their own wild oats.

This was a rumour, as I say, for this was not the sixties, when privacy and reticence were dirty words and happiness was thought to flow from endless talk about one's sexual proclivities and activities. This was the twenties, when you kept yourself to yourself, and all but the outcast families maintained a wall of respectability between themselves and the outside world.

But if the ladies did not discuss among themselves what Jimmy did or did not say when he was reaching climax with them, they did show their knowledge of his activities obliquely, in jokes. "What she needs is a visit from Jimmy Larkins," they would say of a sour spinster, or "Serve your man right if you started asking Jimmy Larkins in," they would tell a neglected wife. After a time they started hinting that they could see his features in the babies that were born. "I don't like the look of that snub nose," they would say, or "Who does that high forehead remind me of?" Thus, in ritual jokes, did the women of Armley reveal their awareness of my grandfather's doings in the neighbourhood without their ever acknowledg-

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ing that he had brought to them personally, along with the bread, that other staff of life.

The women, as I say, could joke about it. Some, no doubt, wanted more from the relationship and became emotional and demanding, but Jimmy had his ways of avoiding commitment. When asked why he had never married, he always said briefly: "It wouldn't be fair." I take him to have been good-hearted and promiscuous, fleeing mentally from the blackness of those months in France. For a time, perhaps even the men of Armley understood.

But the men never treated it as a joke, and as the twenties turned into the thirties, they found that the whole business was becoming very sour indeed. These men had a pride in paternity as fierce as that of any aristocrat, and they added a sense of *possession*—exclusive possession—of a wife that boded ill both for the wives themselves and for Jimmy. The fact that they spent their evenings and weekends in pubs gave no sort of leeway to the wives they left cooped up with a brood within four walls. Their suspicion and anger found its own form, and it was not jocular. "Someone should take a knife to that randy bastard," they would mutter into their pint mugs, or "I'd like to get that bugger up a back alley some dark night—I'd know what to do to him."

Their rage and frustration was dynastic too: they looked at their children, and particularly their sons, and they wondered if they were the fathers. They studied features, even pondered their characters and tastes, and wondered "where they got that from," as if that were a scientific study and could give them certainty one way or the other. In the end, they usually subsided into a boiling uncertainty which found occasional outlets in violence to their wives or their offspring.

Usually, but not always. They were simple men with strong, not always rational, feelings and a fierce pride. Their manhood was their most precious possession, and if they felt it impugned, they became enraged. They loved certainties and feared doubt. To live in uncertainty, permanently, was to them barely tolerable. Some of them, discussing the matter over the years, first in hints and ambiguities, later with angry directness, determined to do something about it. There were six of them: Walter Abbot, Fred Walmsley, Bill Hoggett, Mickey Turner, Harry Colton, and Peter Huggins. They are names that still crop up in conversations in Armley pubs and clubs, because the crime was a local sensation, something much more than a nine-days' wonder, and the men—and, inevitably, their

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wives—became the objects of finger-pointing that lasted the rest of their lives.

In spite of the violent prognostications of the Armley men, they did not decide to castrate Jimmy. Something in them shrank from that, as it did not shrink from murder. They decided to kill him in such a way that all of them must be under suspicion, but no one would be able to decide which had done it.

What may seem odd, even ironic, today is the game they chose as a cover for the murder. Bowls has nowadays a gentle, middle-class, elderly image: it is a game that is played when physical powers have declined and all passions are spent. But many working men in the thirties played bowls: a relaxing game after a day of hard, physical work. Four of the men were good players, and the pub where Jimmy Larkins had his pint or two after work was only a hundred yards or so from the Armley Bowling Club. So one autumn evening the six of them turned up, casually and separately, in the Waggon of Hay, bought Jimmy an extra pint, and finally set out for a game of bowls with Jimmy as umpire. Whether Jimmy, as he rolled off with them, was secretly cock-a-hoop that he had cuckolded every one of them I do not know. I hope not—I hope he regarded his relations with their womenfolk in a different light from that. But we shouldn't try to endow the people of a past age with our own ideological baggage.

The facts of the case were always simple. They played, in the failing light, a game of bowls. At some point in the game Jimmy went off, as he was bound to do, to go to the small public lavatory by the green. The other men claimed they had not noticed when he left, nor who had gone to the lavatory immediately afterwards. They had all relieved themselves at some stage of the game, but they had not gone into the cubicle. They had finished playing without Jimmy—it was a friendly game, and an umpire was not necessary—and had then gone home. Jimmy's body was found next morning in the cubicle. He had been stabbed, and the old raincoat which had been used to protect his murderer from blood had then been thrown over him.

Those were the facts, and no one ever got very far behind or beyond them. The next day the police began a series of interrogations of the men—and, to a buzz of local gossip, their wives. The men stuck doggedly to their story: they didn't remember when Jimmy had left the green, and they didn't remember who had gone to the lavatory after him. They had assumed he had gone home, and had gone on with the game without thinking any more of him. They

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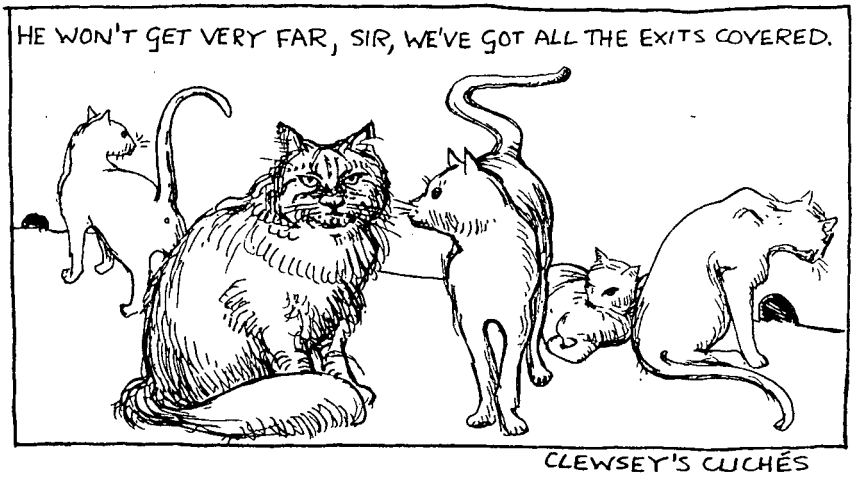
never pretended to have seen other men or women on or around the green, for, though they were hard men, even brutal, they were fair. At one point, three weeks after the murder, the police charged them all with conspiracy to murder, but they could find no evidence that the men had conspired so, fearing a fiasco in court, they soon dropped the charge. And so there it was: six men, all with the opportunity and the identical motive for murder. The police, and everyone in Armley, knew that one of the men had done the deed, but no one knew which.

I must be one of the few people alive who does know. I was told by my grandmother, Florrie Abbot, sitting in her little kitchen in Armley, while upstairs in the bedroom they had shared, the man I called my grandfather was dying painfully of cancer. She told me the story in low, angry tones, interrupted by tears, none of them for the dying man upstairs.



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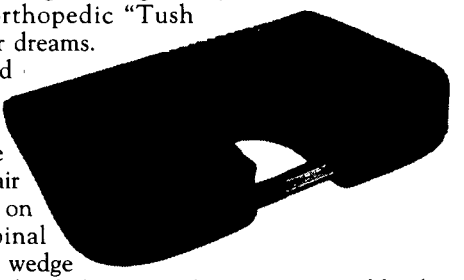

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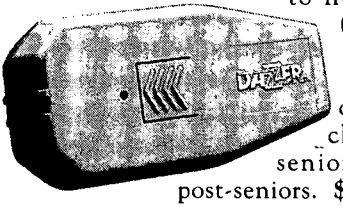

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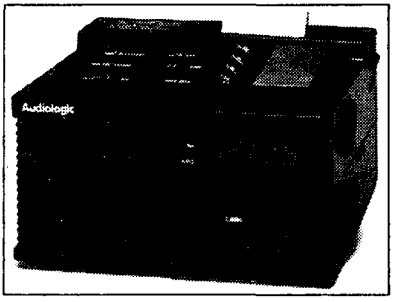

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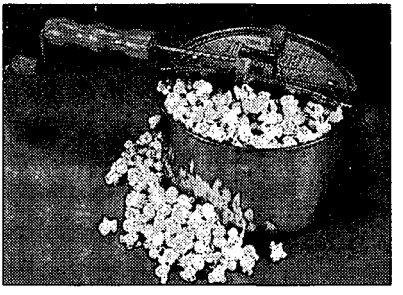

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a *NEW* short story by

BILL PRONZINI

Bill Pronzini is probably best known for the series of novels and short stories featuring his "Nameless Detective," but he can spin a good non-series tale too, and in this one he makes use of his wide experience as a traveler . . .

A TASTE OF PARADISE

by BILL PRONZINI

Jan and I met the Archersons at the Hotel Kolekole in Kailua Kona, on the first evening of our Hawaiian vacation. We'd booked four days on the Big Island, five on Maui, four on Kauai, and three and a half at Waikiki Beach on Oahu. It would mean a lot of shunting around, packing and unpacking, but it was our first and probably last visit to Hawaii and we had decided to see as many of the islands as we could. We'd saved three years for this trip—a second honeymoon we'd been promising ourselves for a long time—and we were determined to get the absolute most out of it.

Our room was small and faced inland; it was all we could afford at a luxury hotel like the Kolekole. So in order to sit and look at the ocean, we had to go down to the rocky, black-sand beach or to a roofed but open-sided lanai bar that overlooked the beach. The lanai bar was where we met Larry and Brenda Archerson. They were at the next table when we sat down for drinks before dinner, and Brenda was sipping a pale green drink in a tall glass. Jan is naturally friendly and curious and she asked Brenda what the drink was—something called an Emerald Bay, a specialty of the hotel that contained rum and crème de menthe and half a dozen other ingredients—and before long the four of us were chatting back and forth. They were about our age, and easy to talk to, and when they

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invited us to join them we agreed without hesitation.

It was their first trip to Hawaii too, and the same sort of dream vacation as ours: "I've wanted to come here for thirty years," Brenda said, "ever since I first saw Elvis in *Blue Hawaii.*" So we had that in common. But unlike us, they were traveling first-class. They'd spent a week in one of the most exclusive hotels on Maui, and had a suite here at the Kolekole, and would be staying in the islands for a total of five weeks. They were even going to spend a few days on Molokai, where Father Damien had founded his lepers' colony over a hundred years ago.

Larry told us all of this in an offhand, joking way—not at all flaunting the fact that they were obviously well-off. He was a tall, beefy fellow, losing his hair as I was and compensating for it with a thick brush moustache. Brenda was a big-boned blond with pretty gray eyes. They both wore loud Hawaiian shirts and flower leis, and Brenda had a pale pink flower—a hibiscus blossom, she told Jan—in her hair. It was plain that they doted on each other and plain that they were having the time of their lives. They kept exchanging grins and winks, touching hands, kissing every now and then like newlyweds. It was infectious. We weren't with them ten minutes before Jan and I found ourselves holding hands too.

They were from Milwaukee, where they were about to open a luxury catering service. "Another lifelong dream," Brenda said. Which gave us something else in common, in an indirect way. Jan and I own a small restaurant in Coeur d'Alene, Carpenter's Steakhouse, which we'd built into a fairly successful business over the past twenty years. Our daughter Lynn was managing it for us while we were in Hawaii.

We talked with the Archersons about the pros and cons of the food business and had another round of drinks which Larry insisted on paying for. When the drinks arrived he lifted his mai tai and said, "*Aloha nui kakou,* folks."

"That's an old Hawaiian toast," Brenda explained. "It means to your good health, or something like that. Larry is a magnet for Hawaiian words and phrases. I swear he'll be able to write a tourist phrasebook by the time we leave the islands."

"Maybe I will too, *kuu ipo.*"

She wrinkled her nose at him, then leaned over and nipped his ear. "*Kuu ipo* means sweetheart," she said to us.

When we finished our second round of drinks Larry asked, "You folks haven't had dinner yet, have you?"

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We said we hadn't.

"Well then, why don't you join us in the Garden Court. Their mahimahi is out of this world. Our treat—what do you say?"

Jan seemed willing, so I said, "Fine with us. But let's make it Dutch treat."

"Nonsense. I invited you, that makes you our guests. No arguments, now—I never argue on an empty stomach."

The food was outstanding. So was the wine Larry selected to go with it, a rich French chardonnay. The Garden Court was open-sided like the lanai bar and the night breeze had a warm, velvety feel, heavy with the scents of hibiscus and plumeria. The moon, huge and near full, made the ocean look as though it were overlaid with a sheet of gold.

"Is this living or is this living?" Larry said over coffee and Kahlúa.

"It's a taste of paradise," Jan said.

"It *is* paradise. Great place, great food, great drinks, great company. What more could anybody want?"

"Well, I can think of one thing," Brenda said with a leer.

Larry winked at me. "That's another great thing about the tropics, Dick. It puts a new spark in your love life."

"I can use a spark," I said. "I think a couple of my plugs are shot."

Jan cracked me on the arm and we all laughed.

"So what are you folks doing tomorrow?" Larry asked. "Any plans?"

"Well, we thought we'd either drive down to the Volcanoes National Park or explore the northern part of the island."

"We're day-tripping up north ourselves—Waimea, Waipio Valley, the Kohala Coast. How about coming along with us?"

"Well . . . "

"Come on, it'll be fun. We rented a Caddy and there's plenty of room. You can both just sit back and relax and soak up the sights."

"Jan? Okay with you?"

She nodded, and Larry said, "Terrific. Let's get an early start—breakfast at seven, on the road by eight. That isn't too early for you folks? No? Good, then it's settled."

When the check came I offered again to pay half. He wouldn't hear of it. As we left the restaurant, Brenda said she felt like going dancing and Larry said that was a fine idea, how about making it a foursome? Jan and I begged off. It had been a long day, as travel days always are, and we were both ready for bed.

In our room Jan asked, "What do you think of them?"

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"Likable and fun to be with," I said. "But exhausting. Where do they get all their energy?"

"I wish I knew."

"Larry's a little pushy. We'll have to make sure he doesn't talk us into anything we don't want to do." I paused. "You know, there's something odd about the way they act together. It's more than just being on a dream vacation, having a good time, but I can't quite put my finger on it . . . "

"They're like a couple of kids with a big secret," Jan said. "They're so excited they're ready to burst."

We've been married for nearly thirty years and we often have similar impressions and perceptions. Sometimes it amazes me just how closely our minds work.

"That's it," I said. "That's it exactly."

The trip to the northern part of the island was enjoyable, if wearying. Larry and Brenda did most of the talking, Larry playing tour guide and unraveling an endless string of facts about Hawaii's history, geography, flora, and fauna. We spent a good part of the morning in the rustic little town of Waimea, in the saddle between Kohala Mountain and the towering Mauna Kea—the seat of the Parker Ranch, the largest individually owned cattle ranch in the United States. It was lunchtime when we finished rubbing elbows with Hawaiian cowboys and shopping for native crafts, and Brenda suggested we buy sandwich fixings and a bottle of wine and find someplace to have a picnic.

Larry wanted to hike out to the rim of the Waipio Valley and picnic there, but the rest of us weren't up to a long walk. So we drove up into the mountains on the Kawaihae road. When the road leveled out across a long plateau we might have been in California or the Pacific Northwest: rolling fields, cattle, thick stands of pine. In the middle of one of the wooded sections, Larry slowed and then pulled off onto the verge.

"Down there by that stream," he said. "Now that's a perfect spot for a picnic."

Brenda wasn't so sure. "You think it's safe? Looks like a lot of brush and grass to wade through. . . . "

He laughed. "Don't worry, there aren't any wild animals up here to bother us."

"What about creepy-crawlies?"

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"Nope. No poisonous snakes or spiders on any of the Hawaiian islands."

"You sure about that?"

"I'm sure, *kuu ipo*. The guidebooks never lie."

We had our picnic, and all through it Larry and Brenda nuzzled and necked and cast little knowing glances at each other. Once he whispered something in her ear that made her laugh raucously and say, "Oh, you're wicked!" Their behavior had seemed charming last night, but today it was making both Jan and me uncomfortable. Fifty-year-old adults who act like conspiratorial teenagers seem ludicrous after you've spent enough time in their company.

Kawaihae Bay was beautiful, and the clifftop view from Upolu Point was breathtaking. On the way back down the coast we stopped at a two-hundred-year-old temple built by King Kamehameha, and at the white-sand Hapuna Beach where Jan fed the remains of our picnic to the dozens of stray cats that lived there. It was after five when we got back to Kailua Kona.

The Archersons insisted again that we have dinner with them and wouldn't take no for an answer. So we stayed at the Kolekole long enough to change clothes and then went out to a restaurant that specialized in luau-style roast pork. And when we were finished eating, back we went to the hotel and up to their suite. They had a private terrace and it was the perfect place, Brenda said, to watch one of the glorious Hawaiian sunsets.

Larry brought out a bottle of Kahlúa, and when he finished pouring drinks he raised his glass in another toast. "To our new *aikane,* Jan and Dick."

"*Aikane* means good friends," Brenda said.

Jan and I drank, but my heart wasn't in it and I could tell that hers wasn't either. The Archersons were wearing thin on both of us.

The evening was a reprise of yesterday's: not too hot, with a soft breeze carrying the scent of exotic flowers. Surfers played on the waves offshore. The sunset was spectacular, with fiery reds and oranges, but it didn't last long enough to suit me.

Brenda sighed elaborately as darkness closed down. "Almost the end of another perfect day. Time goes by so quickly out here, doesn't it, Jan?"

"Yes it does."

Larry said, "That's why you have to get the most out of each day in paradise. So what'll we do tomorrow? Head down to see the volcanoes, check out the lava flows?"

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"There's a road called Chain of Craters that's wonderful," Brenda said. "It goes right out over the flows and at the end there's a place where you can actually walk on the lava. Parts of it are still *hot!*"

I said, "Yes, we've been looking forward to seeing the volcano area. But since you've already been there, I think we'll just drive down by ourselves in the morning—"

"No, no, we'll drive you down. We don't mind seeing it all again, do we, Brenda?"

"I sure don't. I'd love to see it again."

"Larry, I don't mean this to sound ungrateful, but Jan and I would really like some time to ourselves—"

"Look at that moon coming up, will you? It's as big as a Halloween pumpkin."

It was, but I couldn't enjoy it now. I tried again to say my piece, and again he interrupted me.

"Nothing like the moons we get back home in Wisconsin," he said. He put his arm around Brenda's shoulders and nuzzled her neck. "Is it, pet? Nothing at all like a Wisconsin moon."

She didn't answer. Surprisingly, her face scrunched up and her eyes glistened and I thought for a moment she would burst into tears.

Jan said, "Why, Brenda, what's the matter?"

"It's my fault," Larry said ruefully. "I used to call her that all the time, but since the accident . . . well, I try to remember not to but sometimes it just slips out."

"Call her what? Pet?"

He nodded. "Makes her think of her babies."

"Babies? But I thought you didn't have children."

"We don't. Brenda, honey, I'm sorry. We'll talk about something else . . . "

"No, it's all right." She dried her eyes on a Kleenex and then said to Jan and me, "My babies were Lhasa apsos. Brother and sister—Hansel and Gretel."

"Oh," Jan said, "dogs."

"Not just dogs—the sweetest, most gentle . . . " Brenda snuffled again. "I miss them terribly, even after six months."

"What happened to them?"

"They died in the fire, the poor babies. We buried them at Shady Acres. That's a nice name for a pet cemetery, don't you think? Shady Acres?"

"What kind of fire was it?"

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"That's right, we didn't tell you, did we? Our house burned down six months ago. Right to the ground while we were at a party at a friend's place."

"Oh, that's *awful.* A total loss?"

"Everything we owned," Larry said. "It's a good thing we had insurance."

"How did it happen?"

"Well, the official verdict was that Mrs. Cooley fell asleep with a lighted cigarette in her hand."

I said, "Oh, so there was someone in the house besides the dogs. She woke up in time and managed to get out safely, this Mrs. Cooley?"

"No, she died too."

Jan and I looked at each other.

"Smoke inhalation, they said. The way it looked, she woke up all right and tried to get out, but the smoke got her before she could. They found her by the front door."

"Hansel and Gretel were trapped in the kitchen," Brenda said. "She was so selfish—she just tried to save herself."

Jan made a throat-clearing sound. "You sound as though you didn't like this woman very much."

"We didn't. She was an old witch."

"Then why did you let her stay in your house?"

"She paid us rent. Not much, just a pittance."

"But if you didn't like her—"

"She was my mother," Brenda said.

Far below, on the lanai bar, the hotel musicians began to play ukuleles and sing a lilting Hawaiian song. Brenda leaned forward, listening, smiling dreamily. "That's 'Maui No Ka Oi,'" she said. "One of my all-time favorites."

Larry was watching Jan and me. He said, "Mrs. Cooley really was an awful woman, no kidding. Mean, carping—and stingy as hell. She knew how much we wanted to start our catering business but she just wouldn't let us have the money. If she hadn't died in the fire . . . well, we wouldn't be here with you nice folks. Funny the way things happen sometimes, isn't it?"

Neither Jan nor I said anything. Instead we got to our feet, almost as one.

"Hey," Larry said, "you're not leaving?"

I said yes, we were leaving.

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"But the night's young. I thought maybe we'd go dancing, take in one of the Polynesian revues—"

"It's been a long day."

"Sure, I understand. You folks still have some jet lag too, I'll bet. Get plenty of sleep and call us when you wake up, then we'll all go have breakfast before we head for the volcanoes."

They walked us to the door. Brenda said, "Sleep tight, you lovely people," and then we were alone in the hallway.

We didn't go to our room; instead we went to the small, quiet lobby bar for drinks we both badly needed. When the drinks came, Jan spoke for the first time since we'd left the Archersons. "My God," she said, "I had no idea they were like that—so cold and insensitive under all that bubbly charm. Crying over a pair of dogs and not even a kind word for her mother. They're actually glad the poor woman is dead."

"More than glad. And much worse than insensitive."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

"You don't think they—"

"That's just what I think. What we both think."

"Her own mother?"

"Yes. They arranged that fire somehow so Mrs. Cooley would be caught in it, and sacrificed their dogs so it would look even more like an accident."

"For her money," Jan said slowly. "So they could start their catering business."

"Yes."

"Dick . . . we can't just ignore this. We've got to *do* something."

"What would you suggest?"

"I don't know, contact the police in Milwaukee . . . "

"And tell them what that can be proven? The Archersons didn't admit anything incriminating to us. Besides, there must have been an investigation at the time. If there'd been any evidence against them, they wouldn't have gotten Mrs. Cooley's money and they wouldn't be here celebrating."

"But that means they'll get away with it, with cold-blooded murder!"

"Jan, they already have. And they're proud of it, proud of their own cleverness. I'll tell you another thing I think. I think they contrived to tell us the story on purpose, with just enough hints so we'd figure out the truth."

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"Why would they do that?"

"The same reason they latched onto us, convinced themselves we're kindred spirits. The same reason they're so damned eager. They're looking for somebody to share their secret with."

"Dear God."

We were silent after that. The tropical night was no longer soft; the air had a close, sticky feel. The smell of hibiscus and plumeria had turned cloyingly sweet. I swallowed some of my drink, and it tasted bitter. Paradise tasted bitter now, the way it must have to Adam after Eve bit into the forbidden fruit.

The guidebooks do lie, I thought. There are serpents in this Eden, too.

Early the next morning, very early, we checked out of the Kolekole and took the first interisland flight to Honolulu and then the first plane home.

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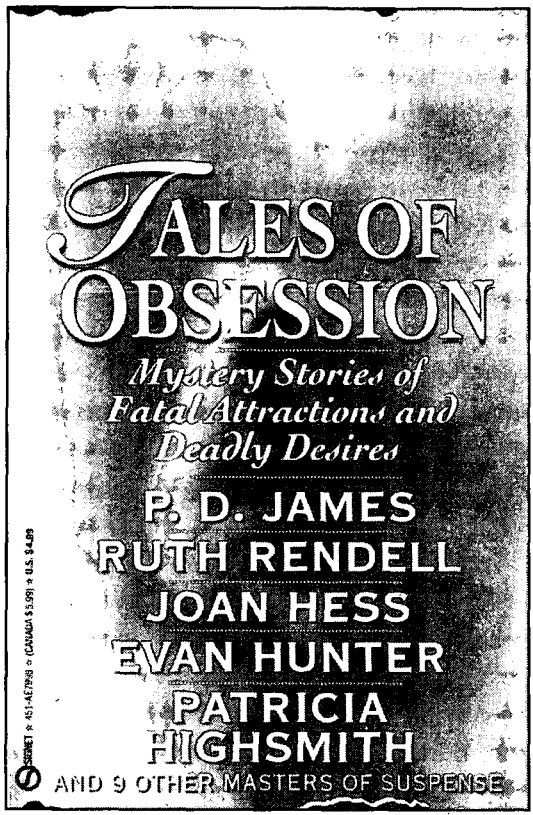
ENTER INTO THE DARKSIDE OF LOVE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a *NEW* short story by

BARBARA PAUL

The author of over a dozen mystery novels, Barbara Paul last contributed to EQMM *with her unique blend of fantasy and mystery in 1987. Her new novel* The Apostrophe Thief, *to be published by Scribners this spring, has already been selected by The Mystery Guild . . .*

PLAY NICE

by BARBARA PAUL

The three of them sat fidgeting, waiting for Mother to tell them they could go. Duncan could hear Hartley muttering to himself; not a peep out of Britt, although she was eager to get going. But until Mother gave them the green light, all they could do was sit and wait. And she was taking her time about it. It seemed the older she got, the more cautious she became.

"What's taking her so long?" Hartley grumbled.

Duncan sighed. Hartley had this need to vocalize, to say out loud what everyone else was thinking. Once he got started, he'd go on and on until Britt lost her patience—which she was doing a lot lately—and told him to shut up.

"What's she waiting for?" Hartley complained. "Fuss, fuss, fuss. What's the holdup? Dammit, she's getting obsessive, scared to let us out of her sight. Hoo, will I be glad to get out of here! Duncan, talk to her. Tell her we're ready to go."

Duncan didn't bother to answer. They'd go when Mother said go.

"You know what I think?" Hartley went on. "I think she just likes to make us wait. Demonstration of power, like that. You think she's possessive now? The day's coming when she won't allow us any independent movement at all, you wait and see. Yeah. We'll just be

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puppets, all three of us, doing what Mother says do, going where Mother says go, *when* she says go—"

"Shut up, Hartley!" Britt snapped.

It was another five minutes before Mother spoke to them. "You may go now," she said softly. "Be careful."

Duncan gave a silent cheer. They'd been cooped up too long; everyone was getting edgy. Mother did take good care of them, but sometimes . . .

His instrument panel gave him the *Clear* signal; he checked the feed from Britt and Hartley and flipped the switch that completed the disengage sequence. The hatches opened, the anchor grapples uncoupled, and the three single-occupancy shuttles dropped away from the mothership, arcing gracefully into a tight orbit around the strange planet below. See you later, Ma.

"Strange" planet only because unfamiliar; and unfamiliar only to them. The colony world of Pirmacha was prosperous and self-sufficient, able up to now to handle its own problems. But this time the Pirmachans had put in a request to Central for outside help, and Duncan and his team got the nod. Duncan had no worries about Britt, but he wasn't certain Hartley would settle down in time to get the job done; Hartley rather envisioned himself as a Young Turk when in fact he was merely young.

The shuttles automatically locked in on Pirmacha's homing beacon and let themselves be guided to the colony's landing field. Mother's voice spoke in their ears. "Force wall is up. The Pirmachans wish you to undergo decontamination."

Hartley said something obscene.

"It's an obvious requirement, Hartley," Mother said in a tone of mild reprimand. "You know that. They may have requested your help, but you are a guest on their world and you will behave like one."

"*Yes,* Mother," Hartley said with all the sarcasm at his command. Britt snickered. "I swear to God," Hartley growled as he climbed out of his shuttle, "on the next circuit, I'm going on a nonsentient ship or I'm not going."

"You don't mean that," Britt said sharply. "Putting your life in the hands of strangers? Relying on quick responses on the part of crew members you don't even know?"

"Yeah, tell me about it," Hartley grumbled.

"I'm trying to," Britt replied earnestly. "You've never traveled on a nonsentient ship, Hartley—I have. Even a 619-X ship computer

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can't handle every emergency without a human initiator. What if somebody forgets to start some necessary repair sequencing? Or is two seconds too slow? You could *die,* Hartley."

"Uh—"

"So the artificial intelligences in the motherships take their 'protector' function a little too seriously—so what? You put up with it."

Hartley was silent a moment, and then said, "You're quite right, Britt. I fell into the trap of taking Mother for granted. It's a mistake I'll not make again." His voice was low and somber.

Duncan swallowed a laugh. He'd seen it before: the minute Hartley got out of physical contact with the mothership, he became more lordly and magisterial. Not that any of them ever truly got away from Mother, thanks to their implanted communicators. She'd been listening to every word.

No Pirmachans were in sight. The three visitors followed flashing green arrows to a small building apart from the regular landing field facilities. Inside, the automatics put them through the standard decontamination procedures, a process that required only twenty minutes.

"The force wall is down," Mother's voice spoke in their ears. "A Pirmachan is waiting for you by Exit One."

Outside the exit, a woman with close-cropped gray hair and angry brown eyes stood glaring at them. "You certainly took your time getting here," she said abruptly. "Which is the prime arbiter?"

Duncan raised an eyebrow. "I am." He gestured toward Britt. "Second arbiter." Then Hartley. "Third arbiter." They never identified themselves by name when called upon to sit in judgment.

The Pirmachan woman nodded briefly. "My name is Copely. I've been delegated by the High Council to be your escort while you are on Pirmacha. This way." No time wasted on amenities; just let's-get-on-with-it.

Copely led the three Circuit arbiters to ground transport nearby. Their route to the city led them past one of the planet's famous horsebreeding facilities, with its bioclean stables and sweeping exercise grounds. Although the breeding and training of racehorses had been only a minor enterprise when the colony was first established, Pirmacha had eventually found itself galaxy-famous as one of the few places left where the purebred Arabian could still be found. Other earth strains had been hopelessly interbred with the multiplicity of equine species encountered in other star systems, from the

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dragon-sized *Donnerpferde* on Wagner's World to those eight-legged oddities in the Aldebaran IV system.

But Pirmacha had no indigenous horses, and the colonists had wisely forbidden the importation of any horses at all once their Arabian stock was established and flourishing. And that decision had made their fortune. An ugly disease called osteodisjunctus, picked up on some outlying world and spread from planet to planet, was able to lie dormant for four or five generations before bursting forth to wipe out horses by the herd. There was no cure, not even a treatment; the disease struck swiftly and inexorably. No case of osteodisjunctus had ever been reported among Pirmachan Arabians, however; and horsebreeders everywhere began turning to Pirmacha for "clean" stock with which to rebuild their stables.

On the other side of a faintly shimmering force wall, a handsome colt with more energy than he knew what to do with easily paced their ground transport. The three newcomers to Pirmacha admired the small head, the graceful sweep of the neck, the seemingly effortless movement of the slender legs. Then suddenly the colt tired of the game and bolted away. It was a safe guess that the reason the tribunal had been summoned to Pirmacha had something to do with the horses. The Pirmachan High Council had been stingy with details in their request for aid. They'd said only that a murder had been committed, and that while Security had narrowed the number of suspects to two, High Council had been unable to determine which of the two was guilty. The Pirmachan request for an outside tribunal had concluded with the assertion that the case was dividing the Pirmachan people and an early resolution was imperative.

"The schism," Mother prompted.

Right. "Copely," Duncan said as they entered the city, "exactly how is this murder case dividing the people? Is everyone taking sides, or what?"

Copely snorted. "You could say that. The two suspects are named Roj Kordan and Anita Verdoris. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Owners?" Britt guessed.

"Owners of the two biggest spreads on Pirmacha," Copely confirmed. "That's Kordan's land you're looking at now. Every small breeder here is dependent in some way on either Kordan or Verdoris—for off-planet animal transport, specialized veterinary medicine, stud service, you name it. Every single person here with any connection to horses whatsoever has a stake in the outcome."

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"And that's why you asked for us," Duncan said suddenly. "Whichever way High Council decided, they'd alienate half the population. You're passing the buck."

"Duncan!" Mother's voice said sharply in his ear. "That's not the *kind* of judgment you've been called on to render here. Apologize to her. Quickly."

Damn; she was right. "Copely, I'm sorry—that was out of line," Duncan said hurriedly. "Of course you want outside judges. You're all too close to the matter to be impartial, and you have the good sense to know it."

The Pirmachan woman grunted something unintelligible.

"Really, Duncan," Mother murmured in his ear. "You're the senior member of this tribunal. You're supposed to know better."

Duncan touched the spot behind his right ear where the communicator was implanted and wished, not for the first time, that the thing came with an on/off switch. He exchanged glances with Britt and Hartley. So they'd been handed a political hot potato; it wouldn't be the first time.

Hartley coughed politely and asked, "What was the victim's name?"

"Longstride," Copely told him. "He was found in the Kordan stables with his throat cut. You'll find all the details in your console brief."

No attempt to make it look like an accident, then. They came to the High Council Building without further talk. It was there they would hear testimony via remote visuals and ultimately render their verdict.

The hallways were crowded with visitors who'd come to gawk at the three arbiters. They all had that same angry look that Copely had, some of them even seething; the place seemed ready to explode. "Best wrap this up fast," Duncan said in a low voice to the other two as they entered the judgment chamber.

Copely activated their consoles for them and retired to a corner, making herself available if needed while the three arbiters studied the brief the High Council had prepared for them. Regardless of all that might be going on in the background, the facts of the crime were fairly simple.

At dawn eight days earlier, a stablehand at Roj Kordan's main facililty had been getting ready for the day's work when he'd caught a whiff of the sickly sweet smell of blood. He'd followed the scent to an unused stall, where he'd found Longstride lying on the floor and

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bleeding profusely from the deep gash in his throat. By the time the stablehand was able to summon help, Longstride had died; the stablehand must have missed the murderer by only minutes. Suspicion immediately fell upon Verdoris, the woman who was Kordan's only real rival on Pirmacha.

"Who was this Longstride?" Hartley asked. "Did he work there?"

But Britt had guessed it. "Longstride was a horse," she said disgustedly. They'd been brought across four star systems to determine who murdered a *horse*.

"Not just *a* horse," Copely spoke up from the corner. "He was the premiere stud on Pirmacha. His get has the best win record in the galaxy, bar none. Kordan had a seven-year waiting list for Longstride."

Hartley stood up. "I don't care if he had a *seventy*-year waiting list. You brought us here through false petition of duress—do you know the penalty for that?"

"There is nothing false about it!" Copely protested. "Longstride's murder has generated violence here—Kordan's people and Verdoris's have already come to blows on a number of occasions. Someone's going to get killed if this isn't settled soon. We may even have civil war!"

"Over a horse?" Duncan asked mildly.

"Not just *a* horse!" Copely was practically screaming at them. "How can you render a just verdict when you don't even try to understand?"

"We don't intend to," Hartley said angrily. "At least, I don't. I refuse to hear the case."

"Hartley!" Mother said sharply. "Remember why you're there!"

"Keep out of this, Mother," Duncan commanded. "This is our bailiwick."

"What?" Copely said, confused.

"Talking to the ship," Britt explained.

Hartley whirled around. "I'm leaving," he announced.

"You'll do no such thing," Mother huffed, ignoring Duncan's instructions to mind her own business. "You're on duty—get back there!"

"I'm going on private time as of now."

"You have no private time coming."

"Then take it out of next week's allowance!" Hartley snarled, and slammed out of the room.

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The third arbiter calmed down quickly enough, once Duncan and Britt followed him out of the High Council building. They looked for, and found, a quiet watering place where they could talk. Copely trailed in after them, their angry shadow, and took a seat where she could keep an eye on them.

"You aren't seriously thinking of hearing this case, are you?" Hartley asked Duncan once their drinks had been served.

"I think we'd better find out more of what's going on here. Mother? Are you there?"

"Of course, Duncan."

"Can you access the Pirmachan newsnets? Give us a rundown on just how serious a schism has developed here?"

"One moment."

Britt took a sip of her drink and said, "That should have been included in our briefing."

"A lot of things should have been included in our briefing," Duncan agreed. "But it's clear why the Pirmachans held back. Central would never have sent an arbitration team if they'd known the murder victim was a horse."

"Not just *a* horse," Britt said wryly, mimicking Copely.

Hartley shot a glance at the councilwoman, who was nursing a drink and glaring at them angrily. "She has a lot of hostility, that one."

"Personal involvement, you think?" Duncan asked. "More than she's told us?"

Hartley just shrugged.

Mother had completed her scan of the local newsnets. "Evidently the schism is more serious than we thought." Duncan winced at the "we." "Not only have there been outbreaks of violence," Mother went on, "but normal business operations have been interrupted to a dangerous extent. I'll give you an example. Off-planet animal transport is handled by a monopoly whose employees all have ties to either Kordan or Verdoris. A docking chief has a brother who supplies feed to Verdoris, a safety inspector moonlights as a scout for Kordan, and so on. When Kordan wanted to ship a consignment of Arabian brood mares to Burleigh's Planet, all the Verdoris-supporters refused to handle the shipment. The mares are still here, unpaid for. That sort of divisiveness has affected every aspect of Pirmachan life—food, machinery, simple maintenance."

"*Every* aspect?" Britt asked dubiously.

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"Just about," Mother replied. "Like the Pirmachan Research Institute. Kordan commissioned them to do some specialized research in horse DNA. But a Verdoris-supporter managed to sabotage the institute's back-up generator and then cut off the power supply for an hour, until Security broke into the control room and arrested him. But an hour was long enough for the experiments to be ruined—at enormous cost to the institute, which of course was not paid by Kordan."

"So you're saying Pirmacha's economy is in danger?" Duncan asked.

"Most assuredly."

Hartley snorted. "And all because of a horse named Longstride!"

"Longstride is the excuse, Hartley," Mother said mildly. "This economic war between Kordan and Verdoris has been building up for a long time."

The three arbiters were silent for a moment. Then Duncan said, "We're going to have to hear the case. There's too much at stake not to."

The other two reluctantly agreed. Then Britt squinted her eyes and announced, "I think we have company."

A stocky man in his middle years stood talking to Copely, both of them eyeing the three arbiters. Then the man nodded and headed their way, broadcasting animosity as he came. "What's this I've been told?" he demanded in a bellicose voice. "You're not even going to hear the case?"

"On the contrary, sir, we have every intention of hearing the case," Duncan replied with exaggerated courtesy. "And you are . . . ?"

Taken aback, the man pulled out a bright green kerchief and mopped his balding forehead. "Forgive me, Arbiters. You are our last chance to resolve our . . . difficulties. My name is Thorin Glimm." He sat down at their table uninvited and said, "I'm Roj Kordan's Chief of Veterinary Services. I can't get the medicines I need or even ordinary lab supplies. Shipping is crippled here, virtually nonexistent—Verdoris's people have seen to that. And with Kordan locked in Security Isolation, nobody's making the decisions that have to be made."

"But surely Verdoris has need of shipping, too," Britt pointed out. "It can't be all her fault, Dr. Glimm. If you're aligned with Kordan—"

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Glimm laughed shortly. "Arbiter, I am probably the only man on Pirmacha with a foot in both camps. I work for Kordan, but my daughter is married to Verdoris's eldest son. I'm going to get hurt whichever way you decide." He sighed. "I don't want either my employer or my son-in-law's mother to be blamed. But *one* of them is responsible for killing Longstride . . . or having him killed, more likely. And the only way to get this place back on track is to settle once and for all the question of which one."

Hartley opened his mouth to speak, but Duncan shot him a warning look. They'd all been wondering why Kordan had been accused, why he would want to kill his own superhorse. But Duncan didn't want Hartley asking about it; all that information would be in the depositions and the testimony. Even this much outside chat was not good. "Doctor, I must ask you not to discuss the facts of the case."

"Of course, of course." Glimm marshaled his thoughts. "I'm just trying to impress upon you the importance of reaching a decisive conclusion. 'Not proved' or one of those other vague and unhelpful verdicts simply won't do. People have to *know* who killed Longstride, they have to be sure in their own minds that the killer didn't get away with it. It must be settled."

"That's what we're here for," Hartley said blandly.

Glimm looked at each of them in turn. "If you can't decide which is guilty . . ." He hesitated.

"If we can't?" Duncan prompted.

The veterinarian patted his forehead with the green kerchief again. "Then flip a coin. But come up with a name. *Settle this.*"

Without another word he pushed away from the table and lumbered out of the room, watched by Copely as well as by the three arbiters. "The man must be torn," Britt said sympathetically. "He lives his life inside the Kordan camp. Yet anything that hurts Verdoris, hurts his daughter. And still he comes here and tells us to chance condemning an innocent person rather than reach no decision."

"How tough can it be?" Hartley wanted to know. "Reaching a decision. We can demand further investigations if we spot something they overlooked."

"We may have to do that," Duncan agreed. "We'll need to go over Security's evidence *very* carefully."

"Then you'd better get cracking," said Mother.

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In so horse-conscious an environment, Pirmachan law was, quite naturally, severe on those who brought harm to another person's stock in any way whatsoever. The penalty for the destruction or even incapacitating of a horse was extreme: permanent exile from Pirmacha, with all the goods and property of the offender reverting to the owner of the horse in question. So if Verdoris was guilty of killing Longstride, then Kordan would end up with a virtual monopoly and thus become the most powerful figure on Pirmacha. And vice versa.

"No wonder everybody's up in arms," Britt said. "For them, it's a matter of which one of the two accused is going to end up running the planet. Hell of a way to hold an election."

Duncan turned to Copely, sitting quietly in her corner of the judgment chamber. "Has this penalty ever been invoked before?"

"In the early years of colonization, frequently," Copely said. "But in my lifetime, only once. Verdoris was the injured party in that case. A rival breeder hamstrung a promising colt Verdoris had just entered in his maiden race. Verdoris collected enough from that judgment to let her challenge Kordan for dominance of the business."

"So Verdoris is familiar with the procedure," Hartley remarked. "That's interesting."

"Is it." Not a question. Copely was a Verdoris-supporter?

They began hearing testimony via remote, the holographic images of the witnesses appearing in the judgment chamber. They heard the stablehand testify how he'd found Longstride bleeding to death. They heard from one of Kordan's trainers, whom the stablehand had gone running to for help. They listened to various security officers explain how a dropped electronic lock pick had led them to take Verdoris into custody: her fingerprints were all over the gadget.

Then they heard the witness who at last made it clear why Kordan had also been taken into custody, a suspect in the slaughter of his own prize money-making stallion. The witness who explained it all was none other than Thorin Glimm, Kordan's Chief of Veterinary Services.

Glimm was a reluctant witness, testifying only after being informed by Pirmachan Security that they'd get permission to use a hypnotic drug on him if necessary. The veterinarian's hologram showed a troubled face and the body language of discouragement. "Longstride was finished," he said unhappily. "He suffered a viral infection last winter, and ever since then his sperm count has been

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way down. We tried every treatment known, but Longstride responded to none of them. We even had the Research Institute working on his DNA, until that fool working for Verdoris cut off the power and destroyed the cultures. Those experiments were our only hope."

Duncan asked, "Couldn't new experiments have been conducted?"

"Yes, Kordan was scheduled to take new blood and tissue samples to the institute the very day Longstride was murdered. Now, of course, it no longer matters."

Mother spoke. "Ask who was conducting the experiments."

Duncan cut off the sound to Glimm. "Mother, I've told you before—don't meddle. We'll call you when we need you."

"But you ought to know who—"

"And we'll get to it. Now butt out."

Mother sniffed.

"Jeez," said Hartley, shaking his head.

"Forget Mother," Britt said curtly. "Now we have a motive for Kordan. Longstride was no longer a valuable animal. If Kordan could kill him and shift the blame to Verdoris, he'd put her out of business."

"Only if Verdoris didn't know about Longstride." Duncan turned the sound back on. "Dr. Glimm, who else knew Longstride's sperm count was down?"

"Kordan and I were the only ones. I did the lab work myself. Kordan ordered me not to say anything." Glimm was looking more and more unhappy.

So Verdoris did *not* know Longstride's earning capacity was no longer a threat to her own stables. The three arbiters mulled that over, and then Hartley said, "I think it's time we heard from the two suspects."

They called Verdoris first. She was a big woman, large-boned and strong-looking. She held her head high as her hologram stared straight at them. "I wish to make a statement," she announced in a tight voice.

Not an unusual request. "Proceed," said Duncan.

"I did not kill Longstride," the big woman said. "I do not know who did. I did not order, hire, or even hint to those around me that I wanted Longstride dead. The electronic lock pick must be mine, since my fingerprints are on it. But I have no idea how it got into Kordan's stable. *I* did not leave it there."

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"What were you doing with a lock pick in the first place?" Britt asked.

"We all use them," Verdoris said. "Everyone who breeds horses keeps a set of picks. They're handy when you need a quick bypass of your internal security system."

"But this pick was keyed to Kordan's security system."

Verdoris spread her hands. "That, I have no explanation for. It would seem to indicate that one of my employees simply picked it up and used it. But for it to work on Kordan's system, someone inside Kordan's organization had to have provided him with the key codes."

"Conspiracy?"

"It's the only explanation I can think of."

"To what benefit? How would one of your employees and one of Kordan's profit from the death of Longstride?"

"I don't know, Arbiter. I *sincerely* hope you will find out."

They questioned her further but learned nothing germane. Verdoris said she was with her husband at the time Longstride was killed, but she could easily have hired someone to do the deed in spite of her protestations to the contrary. Finally Duncan dismissed her and called Roj Kordan to testify.

Kordan was a dark, bearded man whose image blinked into existence breathing fire. "What have you found out about who killed my horse?" he demanded. When Duncan reminded him that he was one of the suspects, Kordan snorted. "I hadn't given up on Longstride yet. There were lab tests yet to be run, DNA tests. You don't understand about Longstride. Even if I were convinced his stud days were over—which I wasn't—I wouldn't have had him killed. Never. Not Longstride."

Hartley asked, "Why did you order Dr. Glimm not to tell anyone about the horse's low sperm count?"

Another snort. "Is that a serious question? Longstride was a goldmine, Arbiter. I didn't want any rumors circulating until I was sure beyond all doubt that he'd sired his last foal. And I was still a long way from being sure."

"Who do you think killed Longstride?"

"It had to be Anita Verdoris. Her prints were on the pick."

"Couldn't the pick have been stolen by someone in her employ?"

"Only if she was careless enough to leave it lying around. And Verdoris is not careless."

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Duncan spoke up. "Do you mean to say no one could steal one of *your* electronic picks if he set his mind to it?"

"Not very likely."

"But possible."

Kordan glowered. "Yes."

"And where were you when Longstride was killed?"

"At Exercise Yard B—there's a filly I wanted to watch work out. Other people saw me there, plenty of them."

Same as with Verdoris, then; Kordan could have sent someone else to do the killing while establishing an alibi for himself elsewhere. Duncan let the irate owner go and called the head of the Research Institute.

She had little to tell them. Kordan had asked the institute for a complete work-up of Longstride's DNA. They'd barely prepared the first batch of cultures when Verdoris's man cut the power and ruined all their samples. The experiments proper hadn't even been started.

Duncan dismissed her and sat staring glumly at Copely in her corner; the councilwoman's face was impassive. They had no grounds for eliminating either Kordan or Verdoris as a suspect. Nor did they have grounds for convicting either of them. No wonder the Pirmachan High Council had asked for help.

Hartley said, "We'll have to use B-Aminosine. That's the only way we're going to find out who's telling the truth."

"We can't use it," Britt objected. "It's too dangerous."

"It's the only hypnotic drug that's one hundred percent reliable."

"That doesn't matter, Hartley. B-Aminosine-induced testimony has been ruled inadmissible. We *can't* use it."

"Wait a minute," Duncan said. "I'm not sure we've got a ruling from Central on that yet. Mother—check on the status of the hypnotics exclusion law, please. See if it's still in Current Dockets." Silence. "Mother? Respond, please."

Her voice, when she spoke, seemed to have lost its usual gentleness. "Are you sure I won't be *butting in?*"

Duncan ignored the sarcasm and repeated his request. Mother, still miffed, reported that a ruling excluding the use of B-Aminosine was expected but was not yet on the books.

"Then we can get in under the wire," Hartley said. "Britt?" She nodded. "Duncan?"

"Let's do it," Duncan said. "And this time not by remote. Copely," he called, "I want Anita Verdoris and Roj Kordan right here in this chamber."

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Anyone injected with B-Aminosine could count on being sick as a dog for anywhere from three days to two weeks: nausea, dizziness, headaches, cold sweats, blurred vision, loss of motor functions. Several cases of partial paralysis of the central nervous system had been reported, and at least one death had been directly attributed to the administration of B-Aminosine. Only an arbiter could order the use of the drug.

The arbiters' decision to subject the two prime suspects to the possibly detrimental effects of B-Aminosine was met with more relief than apprehension by the Pirmachans who heard about it. Suffering a little temporary illness, no matter how unpleasant, was a small price to pay to get at the truth—especially since it was someone else who'd be doing the suffering. The doctor called in to administer the drug had insisted an adjoining chamber be turned into a recovery room before he would proceed; finally he and his team were ready.

Roj Kordan was first. As soon as he went under, the doctor stepped back to allow the arbiters to question him.

Duncan wasted no time. "Kordan, can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Did you kill Longstride?"

"No."

"Did you arrange to have him killed?"

"No."

"Do you know who did kill him?"

"No."

Duncan nodded. "That's all we need to know," he said to the doctor. "Bring him out of it."

Kordan came back to consciousness retching and shaking. Unable to walk, he was carried by the doctor's assistants to the recovery room.

The arbiters tried not to give anything away through their facial expressions as their one remaining suspect was brought in. But Anita Verdoris glanced at Copely and read the truth there. "He passed the test, didn't he?" she asked.

Copely looked away.

Whatever hope the arbiters entertained that they had identified Longstride's killer was quickly quashed. Verdoris's B-Aminosine session went exactly the way Kordan's had gone. *Did you kill, did you arrange, do you know. No. No. No.* The three arbiters looked at

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one another despairingly as Verdoris was carried out.

Mother broke her long silence. "*Now* what are you going to do, Mr. Know-It-All?"

What they did was take a break.

Copely led them to private lodgings, saw they were served a meal, and left them alone. By mutual unspoken agreement, no one mentioned the case they were to decide until they'd finished eating and were indulging in an after-dinner drink.

Duncan took the lead. "It hasn't all been wasted effort," he said. "We did succeed in establishing the innocence of both Verdoris and Kordan. Now we know to look elsewhere."

"Where do we start?" Britt asked.

Hartley scowled. "Did somebody say we ought to wrap this one up fast? Hah. We're going to have to start over, right from the beginning. Anyone on this horsey planet could have done it."

"Anyone except Verdoris and Kordan," Britt said absently.

"We could be here for months! And all because some ex-stud of a racehorse was made into a symbol of the power struggle going on between those two." Hartley's voice was rising. "So what do we do, question the entire population?"

"Take it easy, Hartley," Duncan said. "We won't have to go that far."

"Why not?" Hartley asked loudly. "Line 'em up, shoot 'em full of B-Aminosine, and ask 'em one question. Did you do it? Sooner or later somebody will say yes."

Duncan laughed uncomfortably. "And leave behind us an entire planet full of people too sick to take care of themselves?"

Hartley got up from the table and crossed over to look out a window. "Serve them right," he muttered. "This is a ridiculous situation they've put us in."

Britt sat motionless, watching the two men.

Duncan rose slowly. "Hartley? You're not serious?"

"I'm not?" the other man answered enigmatically.

"You can't be! The entire population . . . For one thing, the local supply of B-Aminosine—"

"—will be adequate for our purposes," Hartley finished for him. "You know damned well the guilty person is someone close to either Kordan or Verdoris. We start with them."

Duncan stared at him, unbelieving. Then he appealed to Britt. "Britt, help me out here!"

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She licked her lips, taking her time. "You know, Duncan . . . he may be right."

"Britt!"

"All we'd have to do is *announce* we're testing everybody," she said carefully. "And then start testing, to prove it. Whoever's guilty will most likely come forward and admit it. He'll know he's going to be caught anyway—why put himself through the agony of a B-Aminosine illness?"

"And if he doesn't come forward?"

"Then we *do* test everybody," Hartley said harshly. "We requisition more of the drug from Central if we have to."

Duncan hesitated. "It would work," Britt said. "Do you know any other way to flush out the killer, Duncan? I'll listen, if you do."

Hartley muttered, "There is no other way."

Duncan was still not convinced. "But to drug-test an entire population—there's no precedent for that in the entire history of arbitration! And it's still a dangerous drug!"

Britt smiled wryly. "You didn't seem too worried about that when we tested Verdoris and Kordan."

The first arbiter was silent. Then: "I'll agree to the *announcement* of planetwide testing. But if early testing doesn't turn up Longstride's killer—"

"Why don't we put off deciding about that until the time comes?" Britt interrupted. "First things first."

"How about it, Duncan?" Hartley asked. "Are we agreed?"

Duncan pressed his lips together. "Agreed."

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR PEA-PICKIN' MINDS?" Mother roared.

All three arbiters winced. "What's wrong?" Duncan asked.

"You are actually going to use that nasty drug on innocent people—because you're too unobservant to see what's staring you right in the face?"

"Now wait a minute," Hartley said angrily.

"I have never seen such sloppy work in my life," Mother went on indignantly. "Sloppy, sloppy, sloppy! How many times have I told you that if a thing is worth doing at all, it's worth doing well?"

About thirty thousand, Duncan guessed.

Mother switched her mode of speaking; now she spoke slow-ly and care-ful-ly, so the dumb bunnies she was talking to could understand. "You don't have to drug the entire populace. The answer is right there under your nose. Remember the man who cut the power

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at the Research Institute? Verdoris's employee? The one who caused Longstride's DNA cultures to be ruined. Remember him? Think hard, now."

Duncan clenched his teeth. "What about him?"

"You never questioned him."

Britt looked puzzled. "Is there some reason we should have? That was just one of several violent incidents that erupted after Longstride was killed."

"Was it, now. Try thinking in sequence for a change. What was Kordan planning to do on the day Longstride died?"

Duncan slapped his forehead. "He was planning to take *new* tissue samples in for testing! The power disruption at the institute came *before* the horse was killed!"

"And you never even noticed that," Mother said reprovingly. "As I said, sloppy. All right, then. First Longstride's DNA is destroyed. Then Longstride himself is destroyed. Does that suggest anything to you?"

The three arbiters exchanged blank looks. Then Britt said: "Someone was trying to remove all traces of Longstride?"

A biomechanical sigh. "Now you're on the right track. By the way, you didn't tell me to access financial records, but I did anyway." Mother paused for effect. "The fellow who cut the power at the institute was paid to do it. A nice sum was transferred to his account the day after the incident, and I traced the source of the transference. I know who paid him."

The three arbiters waited expectantly. She just has to make us ask, Duncan thought. "Who, Mother?"

Mother took her time, milking it. "Dr. Glimm."

"The vet?" Britt said. "But why would he . . . ?"

"Why don't you ask him?" Mother said sweetly. "You can always threaten him with B-Aminosine."

"We can always *use* B-Aminosine," Hartley growled.

"That won't be necessary," Mother informed them. "The man knows drugs. Just let him see what you have in mind and he'll talk. There's one other thing—Longstride's low sperm count. How many people knew about it?"

"Two," said Hartley. "Kordan and Dr. Glimm."

"Exactly. And Security supposedly had to use the threat of drug-testing to get Dr. Glimm to testify about it. So how did Security know to question him in the first place?"

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"Ahhhh," Hartley said. "He had to have leaked it. Kordan sure as hell wouldn't have said anything. But why would Glimm want Longstride's condition known?"

"As a cover story," Duncan said suddenly. "Something else was wrong with Longstride—something so wrong that Dr. Glimm couldn't even tell the horse's owner about it. So wrong that the horse had to be destroyed."

"At last!" Mother said with approval. "I was beginning to think you'd never get there. Well? What are you standing around here for? Get hopping!"

"Yes, Mother," three voices said.

Mother was right. As soon as Dr. Glimm saw the medical team waiting in the judgment chamber, all the life drained out of him. He was caught and he knew it. Glimm shook his head when Duncan asked if they'd need the drug. The medical team quietly departed, leaving only Copely behind to listen with the arbiters.

"It was osteodisjunctus." Dr. Glimm slumped down in a chair and stared at his feet. "Do you know what that is? It's a horse-killer, the worst disease a horse can get. Absolutely virulent, absolutely unstoppable."

"Longstride had osteodisjunctus?" Duncan asked.

"He was a carrier. I spotted an anomaly in his blood two years ago," the veterinarian said. "But I didn't know what it was—it didn't match the known structure of the disease's causative organism. It took me two years of off-and-on testing to identify it as a mutated form. And all that time Longstride's infected sperm was being shipped all over the galaxy. If it ever got out that I had known for two years . . ." He shook his head sadly, leaving the thought unfinished.

So, he was protecting himself, Duncan thought; not Kordan, not Pirmacha's reputation as a reliable source of disease-free horses. Himself. "There was nothing wrong with Longstride's sperm count, was there?"

"Hell, no, it was as high as ever. He had years of stud service left in him. But I had to think of something to make Kordan stop breeding him."

Mother spoke to the three arbiters. "You should have asked to see the sperm-count test results," she said reprovingly. None of them answered her; just one more place they'd slipped up.

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Britt had a question for the veterinarian. "How did you get hold of Verdoris's electronic lock pick?"

"From my daughter's home," Glimm said. "I mentioned that she's married to Verdoris's son, didn't I? I was visiting one day when he came in carrying his mother's lock pick—something was wrong with his own and he'd borrowed hers. He happened to be wearing gloves and the thought occurred to me that her fingerprints must be on the pick. I simply took it when no one was looking."

"And left it at the scene to incriminate Verdoris. Is that the same reason you bribed one of *her* employees to cut the power at the Research Institute?"

"Yes." Miserably.

Duncan said, "Dr. Glimm, why so brutal a method of killing the horse? Surely a lethal injection would have been more humane."

Glimm gave a humorless laugh. "And who would have been the first one to be suspected? No, I had to do it in a way to direct suspicion away from myself." He was silent a moment, and then added: "Arbiters, you never knew Longstride. He was a magnificent animal, truly magnificent. Killing him was the worst thing I've ever had to do in my life. I felt as if I were cutting my own throat."

And so you were. Duncan glanced at the other two arbiters. Britt and Hartley shook their heads; no more questions. It was time to pronounce judgment.

"Dr. Thorin Glimm," Duncan said, "you are hereby sentenced to exile from Pirmacha for the rest of your natural life. If you ever attempt to return to Pirmacha for any reason whatsoever, you will be incarcerated for a period of time to be determined by a later tribunal. Moreover, all your goods and property are forfeit to Roj Kordan in partial recompense for the grievous harm you have done him. Do you understand the sentence?"

Duncan's tone softened. "Dr. Glimm, you'll be given time to settle your affairs before your exile begins. But you do understand, don't you, that you'll not be allowed to practice veterinary medicine ever again?"

Glimm nodded. "It doesn't matter. Somehow . . . somehow I just don't have the heart for it anymore."

At Duncan's signal, Copely summoned the security officers to take Glimm away. His head sagged down on his chest as he left, suddenly an old man.

"Thank God that's over," Hartley said with a sigh of relief. "Now we can get out of here."

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But Mother had to have the last word. "At least you cleaned up after yourselves," she admitted grudgingly. "But don't you ever, *ever* make such a mess again!"

Copely was driving them back to the landing field where their shuttles waited. The councilwoman was all smiles, a startling contrast to her dour anger on the trip in. "The only downside is that Glimm's daughter will lose her inheritance," she was saying. "Sins of the fathers. But she's hardly left out in the cold. She's part of the Verdoris family now."

"It's *your* law," Hartley said shortly.

"Oh, I wasn't criticizing," Copley said with a smile. "In fact, we're eternally grateful to you. You not only found Longstride's killer, you also alerted us to a greater danger."

"You mean the osteodisjunctus," Duncan said.

"That's what I mean. We'll shut down operations for a while, until we can do a thorough testing of all the livestock on Pirmacha. If we find any examples of Dr. Glimm's 'anomaly' in the blood . . ."

"What will you do?" Britt asked.

"Destroy the carriers, of course," Copely said. "But in a more humane manner than the way Dr. Glimm dispatched poor Longstride." She sighed. "I wish you could have met Longstride, Arbiters. He was the greatest horse I have ever known."

Duncan half expected a sarcastic comment from Mother, but none came.

They reached the landing field. With repeated expressions of gratitude, Copely bade them farewell. The arbiters had been on Pirmacha less than a full real-time day, but to Duncan it seemed like a year. Britt and Hartley looked every bit as drained as he felt, pinch-faced and not at all pleased with themselves. Today had not been the team's most stellar performance; none of the three would ever be regaling grandchildren with stories of Pirmacha.

Wearily Duncan climbed into his shuttle, wondering if they were going to be sent to bed without their supper.

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Yorkshire born and bred, but for a number of years a resident of Canada, Peter Robinson goes back to his roots in his mystery series featuring Inspector Banks. The research for his fiction, he told a recent gathering of mystery fans, requires him to return frequently to the beautiful Yorkshire Dales and the ancient pubs his detective would frequent. The following is Banks's second appearance in a short story, but he is the protagonist of all six of Peter Robinson's novels . . .

THE GOOD PARTNER

by PETER ROBINSON

1.

The louring sky was black as a tax inspector's heart when Detective Chief Inspector Alan Banks pulled up outside 17 Oakley Crescent at eight o'clock one mid-November evening. An icy wind whipped up the leaves and set them skittering around his feet as he walked up the path to the glass-panelled door.

Detective Constable Susan Gay was waiting for him inside, and Peter Darby, the police photographer, was busy with his video recorder. Between the glass coffee table and the brick fireplace lay the woman's body, blood matting the hair around her left temple. Banks put on his latex gloves, then bent and picked up the object beside her. The bronze plaque read, "Eastvale Golf Club, 1991 Tournament. Winner: David Fosse." There was blood on the base of the trophy. The man Banks assumed to be David Fosse sat on the sofa staring into space.

A pile of photographs lay on the table. Banks picked them up and flipped through them. Each was dated 13 November 1993 across the bottom. The first few showed group scenes—red-eyed people eating, drinking, and dancing at a banquet of some kind—but the last ones told a different story. Two showed a handsome young man in a navy blue suit, white shirt, and garish tie, smiling lecherously at the photographer from behind a glass of whisky. Then the scene shifted

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to a hotel room, where the man had loosened his tie. None of the other diners was to be seen. In the last picture, he had also taken off his jacket. The date had changed to 14 November 1993.

Banks turned to the man on the sofa. "Are you David Fosse?" he asked.

There was a pause while the man seemed to return from a great distance. "Yes," he said finally.

"Can you identify the victim?"

"It's my wife, Kim."

"What happened?"

"I . . . I was out taking the dog for a walk. When I got back I found . . . " He gestured towards the floor.

"When did you go out?"

"Quarter to seven, as usual. I got back about half past and found her like this."

"Was your wife in when you left?"

"Yes."

"Was she expecting any visitors?"

He shook his head.

Banks held out the photos. "Have you seen these?"

Fosse turned away and grunted.

"Who took them? What do they mean?"

Fosse stared at the Axminster carpet.

"Mr. Fosse?"

"I don't know."

"The date. November thirteenth. Last Saturday. Is that significant?"

"My wife was at a business convention in London last weekend. I assume they're the pictures she took."

"What kind of convention?"

"She's involved in servicing home offices and small businesses. *Servicing,*" he sneered. "Now there's an apt term."

Banks singled out the man in the gaudy tie. "Do you know who this is?"

"No." Fosse's face darkened and both his hands curled into fists. "No, but if I ever get hold of him—"

"Mr. Fosse, did you argue with your wife about the man in these photographs?"

Fosse's mouth dropped. "They weren't here when I left."

"How do you explain their presence now?"

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"I don't know. She must have got them out while I was taking Riley for a walk."

Banks looked around the room and saw a camera on the sideboard, a Canon. It looked like an expensive autofocus model. He picked it up carefully and put it in a plastic bag. "Is this yours?" he asked Fosse.

Fosse looked at the camera. "It's my wife's. I bought it for her birthday. Why? What are you doing with it?"

"It may be evidence," said Banks, pointing at the exposure indicator. "Seven pictures have been taken on a new film. I have to ask you again, Mr. Fosse, did you argue with your wife about the man in these photos?"

"And I'll tell you again. How could I? They weren't there when I went out, and she was dead when I got back."

The dog barked from the kitchen. The front door opened and Dr. Glendenning walked in, a tall, imposing figure with white hair and a nicotine-stained moustache.

Glendenning glanced sourly at Banks and Susan and complained about being dragged out on such a night. Banks apologised. Though Glendenning was a Home Office pathologist, and a lowly police surgeon could pronounce death, Banks knew that Glendenning would never have forgiven them had they not called him.

As the scene-of-crime team arrived, Banks turned to David Fosse and said, "I think we'd better carry on with this down at headquarters."

Fosse shrugged and stood up to get his coat. As they left, Banks heard Glendenning mutter, "A golf trophy. A bloody golf trophy! Sacrilege."

2.

"Do you think he did it, sir?" Susan asked Banks.

Banks swirled the inch of Theakston's bitter at the bottom of his glass. "I don't know. He certainly had means, motive, and opportunity. But something about it makes me uneasy."

It was almost closing time, and Banks and Susan sat in the warm glow of the Queen's Arms having a late dinner of microwaved steak and kidney pud, courtesy of Cyril, the landlord, who was used to their unsociable hours. Outside, rain lashed against the red and amber windows.

Banks pushed his plate away and lit a cigarette. He was tired. The Fosse call had come in just as he was about to go home after a long day of paperwork and boring meetings.

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They had learned little more during a two-hour interrogation at the station. Kim Fosse had left for London on Friday and returned Monday with her business partner, Norma Cheverel, and the convention had been held at the Ludbridge Hotel in Kensington.

David Fosse maintained his innocence, but sexual jealousy made a strong motive, and now he languished in the cells under Eastvale Divisional Headquarters. *Languish* was perhaps too strong a word, as the cells were as comfortable as many Bed and Breakfasts, and the food and service much better. The only problem was that you couldn't open the door and go for a walk in the Yorkshire Dales when you felt like it. Fosse had not been charged yet, and they could only hold him for twenty-four hours, thirty-six if a superintendent granted the extra twelve.

They learned from the house-to-house that Fosse *did* walk the dog—several people had seen him—but not even Dr. Glendenning could pinpoint time of death to within the forty-five minutes he was out of the house.

Fosse could have murdered his wife before he left or when he got home. He could also have nipped back around the rear, where a path ran by the river, got into the house unseen the back way, then resumed his walk.

"Time, ladies and gentlemen, please," called Cyril, ringing his bell behind the bar. "And that includes coppers."

Banks smiled and finished his beer. "There's not a lot more we can do tonight, anyway," he said. "I think I'll go home and get some sleep."

"I'll do the same." Susan reached for her overcoat.

"First thing in the morning," said Banks, "we'll have a word with Norma Cheverel, see if she can throw any light on what happened in London last weekend."

3.

Norma Cheverel was an attractive woman in her early thirties with a tousled mane of red hair, a high freckled forehead, and the greenest eyes Banks had ever seen. Contact lenses, he decided uncharitably, perhaps to diminish the sense of sexual energy he felt emanate from her.

She sat behind her desk in the large carpeted office, swivelling occasionally in her executive chair. After her assistant had brought coffee, Norma pulled out a long cigarillo and lit up. "One of the

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pleasures of being the boss," she said. "The buggers can't make you stop smoking."

"You've heard about Kim Fosse, I take it?"

"On the local news last night. Poor Kim." She shook her head.

"We're puzzled about a few things," Banks said. "Maybe you can help us?"

"I'll try."

"Did you notice her taking many photographs at the convention?"

Norma Cheverel frowned. "I can't say I did, really, but there were quite a few people taking photographs there, especially at the banquet. You know how people get silly at conventions. I never could understand this mania for capturing the moment, can you, Chief Inspector?"

Banks, whose wife Sandra was a photographer, could understand it only too well, though he would have quibbled with "capturing the moment." A good photographer, a *real* photographer, Sandra had often said, did much more than that; she transformed the moment. But he let the aesthetics lie.

Norma Cheverel was right. Banks too had noticed that since the advent of cheap, idiot-proof cameras every Tom, Dick, and Harry had started taking photos indoors. He had been half-blinded a number of times by a group of tourists "capturing the moment" in some pub or restaurant. It was almost as bad as the cellular phone craze, though not quite.

"Did Kim Fosse share this mania?" he asked.

"She had a fancy new camera. She took it with her. That's all I can say, really. Look, I don't—"

"Bear with me, Ms. Cheverel."

"Norma, please."

Banks, who reserved the familiarity of first-name terms to exercise power over suspects, not to interview witnesses, went on. "Do you know if she had affairs?"

This time Norma Cheverel let the silence stretch. Banks could hear the fan cooling the microchip in her computer. She stubbed out her long cigarette, careful to make sure it wasn't still smouldering, sipped some coffee, swivelled a little, and said, "Yes. Yes, she did. Though I wouldn't really describe them as affairs."

"How would you describe them?"

"Just little flings, really. Nothing that really *meant* anything to her."

"Who with?"

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"She didn't usually mention names."

"Did she have a fling in London last weekend?"

"Yes. She told me about it on the way home. Look, Chief Inspector, Kim wasn't a bad person. She just needed something David couldn't give her."

Banks took a photograph of the man in the navy blue suit from his briefcase and slid it across the desk. "Know him?"

"It's Michael Bannister. He's with an office furnishings company in Preston."

"And did Kim Fosse have a fling with him that weekend?"

Norma swivelled and bit her lip. "She didn't tell me it was him."

"Surprised?"

She shrugged. "He's married. Not that that means much these days. I've heard he's very much in love with his wife, but she's not very strong. Heart condition, or something." She sniffled, then sneezed and reached for a tissue.

"What did Kim tell you about last weekend?"

Norma Cheverel smiled an odd, twisted little smile from the corner of her lips. "Oh, Chief Inspector, do you really want all the details? Girl talk about sex is so much *dirtier* than men's, you know."

Though he felt himself reddening a little, Banks said, "So I've been told. Did she ever express concern about her husband finding out?"

"Oh yes. She told me under no circumstances to tell David. As if I would. He's very jealous and he has a temper."

"Was he ever violent towards her?"

"Just once. It was the last time we went to a convention, as a matter of fact. Apparently he tried to phone her in her room after midnight—some emergency to do with the dog—and she wasn't there. When she got home, he lost his temper, called her a whore, and hit her."

"How long had they been married?"

Norma sniffled again and blew her nose. "Four years."

"How long have you and Kim Fosse been in business together?"

"Six years. We started when she was still Kim Church. She'd just got her M.B.A."

"How did the partnership work?"

"Very well. I'm on the financial side, and Kim dealt with sales and marketing."

"Are you married yourself?"

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"I don't see that it's any of your business, Chief Inspector, but no, I'm not. I guess Mr. Right just hasn't turned up yet," she said coldly, then looked at her gold wrist watch. "Are there any more questions?"

Banks stood up. "No, that's all for now. Thank you very much for your time."

She stood up and walked around the desk to show him to the door. Her handshake on leaving was a little brisker and cooler than it had been when he arrived.

4.

"So Kim Fosse was discreet, but she took photographs," said Susan when they met up in Banks's office later that morning. "Kinky?"

"Could be. Or just careless. They're pretty harmless, really." The seven photographs from the film they had found inside the camera showed the same man in the hotel room on the same date, 14 November 1993.

"Michael Bannister," Susan read from her notes. "Sales Director for Office Comforts Ltd. based in Preston, Lancashire. Lives in Blackpool with his wife, Lucy. No children. His wife suffers from a congenital heart condition, needs constant pills and medicines, lots of attention. His workmates tell me he's devoted to her."

"A momentary lapse, then?" Banks suggested. He walked over to his broken venetian blind and looked out over the rainswept market square. Only two cars were parked there today. The gold hands on the blue face of the church clock stood at eleven thirty-nine.

"It happens, sir. Maybe more often than we think."

"I know. Reckon we'd better go easy approaching him?"

"No sense endangering the wife's health, is there?"

"You're right. See if you can arrange to see him at his office." Banks looked out of the window and shivered. "I don't much fancy a trip to the seaside in this miserable weather anyway."

5.

The drive across the Pennines was a nightmare. All the way along the A59 they seemed to be stuck behind one lorry or another churning up gallons of filthy spray. Around Clitheroe, visibility was so poor that traffic slowed to a crawl. The hulking whale-shapes of the hills that flanked the road were reduced to faint grey outlines in the rain-haze. Banks played a tape of Ute Lemper singing Michael Nyman's versions of Celan's poems. Contemporary, a little quirky,

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but beautiful, stirring music, and oddly suited to his mood.

The office building on Ribbleton Lane, just east of the city centre, was three-story redbrick. The receptionist directed them to Bannister's office on the second floor.

In the anteroom, a woman sat clicking away at the keyboard of a PC. Curly-haired, plump, in her forties, she came over and welcomed them. "Hello, I'm Carla Jacobs. I'm Mr. Bannister's secretary. He's in with someone at the moment, but he won't be a minute. He knows you're coming."

Banks and Susan looked at the framed photographs of company products and awards on the walls as they waited. All the time, Banks sensed Carla Jacobs staring at the back of his head. After a couple of minutes, he turned around just in time to see her avert her gaze.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

She blushed. "No. Well, not really. I mean, don't think I'm being nosy, but is Mr. Bannister in some kind of trouble?"

"Why do you ask?"

"It's just that I'm a good friend of Lucy's, that's Mr. Bannister's wife, and I don't know if you know, but—"

"We know about her health problems, yes."

"Good. Good. Well . . . "

"Have you any reason to think Mr. Bannister might be in trouble?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Oh no. But it's not every day we get the police visiting."

At that moment the inner door opened and a small ferret-faced man in an ill-fitting suit flashed a smile at Carla as he scurried out. In the doorway stood the man in the photographs. Michael Bannister. He beckoned Banks and Susan in.

It was a large office, with Bannister's desk, files, and bookcases taking up one half and a large oval table for meetings in the other. They sat at the table, so well polished Banks could see his reflection in it, and Susan took out her notebook.

"I understand you attended a business convention in London last weekend?" Banks started.

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"Did you meet a woman there called Kim Fosse?"

Bannister averted his eyes. "Yes."

Banks showed him a photograph of the victim, as she had been in life. "Is this her?"

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"Yes."

"Did you spend the night with her?"

"I don't see what that's got—"

"Did you?"

"Look, for Christ's sake. My wife . . . "

"It's not your wife we're asking."

"What if I did?"

"Did she take these photographs of you?" Banks fanned the photos in front of him.

"Yes," he said.

"So you slept with Kim Fosse and she took some photographs."

"It was just a lark. I mean, we'd had a bit to drink, I—"

"I understand, sir," said Banks. "You don't have to justify yourself to me."

Bannister licked his lips. "What's this all about? Will it go any further?"

"I can't say," said Banks, gesturing for Susan to stand up. "It depends. We'll keep you informed."

"Good Lord, man," said Bannister. "Please. Think of my wife." He looked miserably after them, and Banks caught the look of concern on Carla Jacobs's face.

"That was a bit of a wasted journey, wasn't it, sir?" Susan said on the way back to Eastvale.

"Do you think so?" said Banks. "I'm not at all sure, myself. I think our Mr. Bannister was lying about something. And I'd like to know what Carla Jacobs had on her mind."

6.

Sandra was out. After Banks hung up his raincoat, he went straight into the living room of his south Eastvale semi and poured himself a stiff Laphroaig. He felt as if the day's rain had permeated right to his bone marrow. He made himself a cheese and onion sandwich, checked out all four television channels, found nothing worth watching, and put some Bessie Smith on the CD player.

But "Woman's Trouble Blues" took a background role as the malt whisky warmed his bones and he thought about the Fosse case. Why did he feel so ill at ease? Because David Fosse sounded believable? Because he had felt Norma Cheverel's sexual power and resented it? Because Michael Bannister had lied about something? And was Carla Jacobs in love with her boss, or was she just protecting Lucy Bannister? Banks fanned out the photographs on the coffee table.

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Before he could answer any of the questions, Sandra returned from the photography course she was teaching at the local college. When she had finished telling Banks how few people knew the difference between an aperture and a hole in the ground, which Banks argued was a poor metaphor because an aperture *was* a kind of hole, she glanced at the photos on the coffee table.

"What are these, evidence?" she asked, stopping herself before she touched them.

"Go ahead," said Banks. "We've got all we need from them."

Sandra picked up a couple of the group shots, six people in evening dress each holding a champagne flute out towards the photographer, all with the red eyes characteristic of a cheap automatic flash.

"Ugh," said Sandra. "What dreadful photos."

"Snob," said Banks. "She doesn't have as good a camera as you."

"Doesn't matter," said Sandra. "A child of five could do a better job with a Brownie than these. What kind of camera was it anyway?"

"A Canon," said Banks, adding the model number. The identification tag on the evidence bag was etched in his memory.

Sandra put the photos down and frowned. "A what?"

Banks told her again.

"It can't be."

"Why not?"

Sandra leaned forward, slipped her long tresses behind her ears, and spread out the photos. "Well, they've all got red-eye," she said. "The camera you mentioned protects against red-eye."

It was Banks's turn to look puzzled.

"Do you know what red-eye is?" Sandra asked.

"I don't know an aperture from a hole in the ground."

"Be serious. When you're in a dim room, your pupils dilate, the iris opens to let in more light so you can see properly, just like an aperture on a camera. You know what it's like when you first walk into a dark place and your eyes slowly adjust?"

Banks nodded. "Go on."

"Well, when you're subjected to a sudden, direct flash of light, the iris doesn't have time to close. Red-eye is actually caused by the flash illuminating the blood vessels in the eye."

"Why doesn't it happen with all flash photographs then? Surely the whole point of a flash is that you use it in the dark?"

"Mostly, yes, but red-eye only happens when the flash is pointed *directly* at your iris. It doesn't happen when the flash is held from *above* the camera. The angle's different. See what I mean?"

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"Yes. But you don't usually see people with hand-held flashes using cameras like that."

"That's right. That's because there's another way of getting rid of red-eye. The more expensive models, like the one you just mentioned to me, set off a series of quick flashes first, *before* the exposure, and that gives the iris a chance to close. Simple, really."

"So you're saying that these photographs couldn't have been taken with that camera?"

"That's right."

"Interesting," said Banks. "Very interesting."

Sandra grinned. "Have I solved your case?"

"Not exactly, no, but you've certainly confirmed some of the doubts I've been having." Banks reached for the telephone. "We found the husband's fingerprints on the photos and the murder weapon, so the super authorised another twelve hours remand. But after what you've told me, I think I can make sure that he sleeps in his own bed tonight."

7.

Norma Cheverel wasn't pleased to see Banks and Susan late the next morning. She welcomed them with all the patience and courtesy of a busy executive, tidying files on her desk as Banks talked, twice mentioning a luncheon appointment that was fast approaching. For a while, Banks ignored her rudeness, then he said, "Will you stop that and pay attention, Ms. Cheverel?"

She gave him a challenging look. There was no "Call me Norma" this time, and the sexual voltage was turned very low. But she sat as still as she could and rested her hands on the desk.

"Yes, *sir*," she said. "You know, you remind me of an old schoolteacher."

"Do you own a camera, Ms. Cheverel."

"Yes."

"What model?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Just one of those cheap things everybody uses these days."

"Does it have an automatic flash?"

"Yes. They all do, don't they?"

"What about red-eye?"

"What's that? A late-night flight?"

Banks explained. She started playing with the files again.

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"I'd appreciate it if you'd let us examine your camera, Ms. Cheverel."

"Why on earth—"

"Because the photographs we found at the scene couldn't possibly have been taken by Kim Fosse's camera. That's why." Banks explained what Sandra had told him, and what the result of tests earlier that morning had confirmed.

Norma Cheverel spread her hands. "So someone else took them. I still don't see what that's got to do with me."

Banks glanced over to Susan, who said, "Ms. Cheverel. Is it true that you lost almost fifty thousand pounds on a land speculation deal earlier this year?"

Norma Cheverel looked daggers at her and said to Banks through clenched teeth, "My business deals are no—"

"Oh, but they are," said Banks. "In fact, Susan and I have been doing quite a bit of digging this morning. It seems you've made a number of bad investments these past couple of years, haven't you? Where's the money come from?"

"The money was mine. All mine."

Banks shook his head. "I think it came from the partnership." He leaned forward. "Know what else I think?"

"What do I care?"

"I think your cocaine habit is costing you a fortune, too, isn't it?"

"How dare you!"

"I noticed how jittery you were, how you couldn't keep still. And then there's the sniffling. Funny how your cold seems better this morning. How much? Say ten, twenty thousand a year up your nose?"

"I want my solicitor."

"I think you were cheating the partnership, Ms. Cheverel. I think you knew you'd gone so far it was only a matter of time before Kim Fosse found out about it. You dealt with the accounting, you told us, and she was on the marketing side. What could have been better? It would take her awhile to discover something was wrong, but you couldn't keep it from your partner forever, could you? So you came up with a plot to get rid of her and blame it on her husband. We only have *your* word that her husband was jealous enough to be violent."

"Ask anyone," said Norma Cheverel. "They'll tell you. Everyone saw her black eye after the last convention."

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"We know about that. David Fosse told us this morning. It was something he regretted very much. But the only person Kim confided in was *you,* which gave you every opportunity to build a mountain of lies and suspicion on a small foundation of truth."

"This is absurd." Norma swivelled and reached for the phone. "I'm calling my solicitor."

"Go ahead," said Banks. "But you haven't been charged with anything yet."

She held the phone halfway between her mouth and its cradle and smiled. "That's right," she said. "You can make all the accusations you want, but you can't prove anything. That business about the camera doesn't mean a thing, and you know that as well as I do."

"It proves that Kim Fosse *didn't* take those photographs. Therefore, someone must have planted them to make it *look* as if she had been foolish as well as indiscreet."

She put the phone down. "You can't prove it was me. I defy you."

Banks stood up. He was loath to admit it, but she was right. Short of finding someone who had seen her or her car in the vicinity of the Fosse house around the time of the murder, there was no proof. And Norma Cheverel wasn't the kind to confess. The bluff was over. But at least Banks and Susan *knew* as they walked out of the office that Norma Cheverel had killed Kim Fosse. The rest was just a matter of time.

8.

The break took two days to come, and it came from an unexpected source.

The first thing Banks did after his interview with Norma Cheverel was organise a house-to-house of Fosse's neighbourhood to find out if indeed anyone had seen Norma Cheverel or her car that evening. Someone remembered seeing a grey foreign car of some kind, which was about the closest they got to a sighting of Norma's silver BMW.

Next, he got a list of all 150 conventioneers and set a team to phone and find out if anyone remembered Norma Cheverel taking photos on the evening of the banquet. They'd got through seventy-one with no luck so far, when Banks's phone rang.

"This is Carla Jacobs, Inspector Banks. I don't know if you remember me. I'm Mr. Bannister's secretary."

"I remember you," said Banks. "What is it?"

"Well, I was going to ask you the same thing. You see, I've been talking to Lucy, and she's so worried that Michael is in trouble it's damaging her health."

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"Mr. Bannister is in no trouble as far as I know," said Banks. "He just committed an unfortunate indiscretion, that's all. No blame."

"But that's just it," said Carla Jacobs. "You see, she said he's been acting strangely. He's depressed. He shuts himself away. He doesn't talk to her. Even when he's with her she says he's withdrawn. It's getting her down. I thought if you could talk to her . . . just set her at ease."

Banks sighed. Playing nursemaid. "All right," he said. "I'll call her."

"Oh, will you? Thank you. Thank you ever so much." She lowered her voice. "Mr. Bannister is in his office now. She'll be by the phone at home."

Lucy Bannister answered on the first ring. "Yes?"

Banks introduced himself.

"I'm so worried about Michael," she said, in that gushing manner of someone who's been waiting all week to pour it all out. "He's never like this. Never. Has he done something awful? Are you going to arrest him? Please, you can tell me the truth."

"No," said Banks. "No, he hasn't, and no we're not. He's simply been helping us with our enquiries."

"That could mean anything. Enquiries into what?"

Banks debated for a moment whether to tell her. It would do no harm, he thought. "He was at a business convention in London last weekend. We're interested in the movements of someone else who was there, that's all."

"Are you sure that's all?"

"Yes."

"And it's nothing serious?"

"Not for your husband, no."

"Thank you. You don't know what this means to me." He could hear the relief in her voice. "Because of my heart condition, you see, Michael is a bit overprotective. I don't deny I'm weak, but sometimes I think he just takes too much upon himself." She paused and gave a small laugh. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this. It must be because I'm so relieved. He's a normal man. He has needs like any other man. I know he goes with other women, and I never mention it because I know it would upset him and embarrass him. He thinks he keeps it from me—to protect me from distress—and it's just easier to let him think that."

"I can appreciate that," Banks said, only half listening. Why hadn't he realised before? Now he knew what Michael Bannister

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had lied about, and why. "Look, Mrs. Bannister," he cut in, "you might be able to help us. Do you think you could talk to your husband, let him know you know?"

"I don't know. I don't want to upset him."

Banks felt a wave of annoyance. The Bannisters were so damn busy protecting one another's feelings that there was no room for the truth. He could almost hear her chewing her lip over the line. He tried to keep the irritation out of his voice. "It could be very important," he said. "And I'm sure it won't do any harm. If that's what he's feeling guilty about, you can help him get over it, can't you?"

"I suppose so." Hesitant, but warming to the idea.

"I'm sure you'd be helping him, helping your relationship." Banks cringed to hear himself talk. First a nursemaid, now a bloody marriage guidance counsellor.

"Perhaps."

"Then you'll do it? You'll talk to him?"

"Yes." Determined now. "Yes, I will, Mr. Banks."

"And will you do me one more favour?"

"If I can."

"Will you give him these telephone numbers and tell him if he thinks of anything else he can call me without fear of any charges being made against him?" He gave her his work and home phone numbers.

"Ye-es." She clearly didn't know what he meant, but that didn't matter.

"It's very important that you tell him there'll be no action taken against him and that he should talk to *me* personally. Is that clear?"

"Yes. I don't know what all this is about, but I'll do as you say. And thank you."

"Thank you." Banks headed for a pub lunch in the Queen's Arms. It was too early to celebrate anything yet, but he kept his fingers crossed as he walked in the thin November sunshine across Market Street.

9.

Norma Cheverel's luxury flat was every bit as elegant and expensively furnished as Banks had expected. Some of the paintings on her walls were originals, and her furniture was all handcrafted, by the look of it. She even had an oak table from Robert Thompson's

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workshop in Kilburn. Banks recognised the trademark: a mouse carved on one of the legs.

When Banks and Susan turned up at seven-thirty that evening, Norma had just finished stacking her dinner dishes in the machine. She had changed from her work outfit and wore black leggings, showing off her shapely legs, and a woolly green sweater that barely covered her hips. She sat down and crossed her legs, cigarillo poised over the ashtray beside her.

"Well," she said. "Do I need my solicitor yet?"

"I think you do," said Banks. "But I'd like you to answer a few questions first."

"I'm not saying a word without my solicitor present."

"Very well," said Banks. "That's your right. Let me do the talking, then."

She sniffed and flicked a half-inch of ash into the ashtray beside her. Her crossed leg was swinging up and down as if some demented doctor were tapping the reflex.

"I might as well tell you first of all that we've got Michael Bannister's testimony," Banks began.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do. It was *you* who took those photographs at the banquet and in the hotel room afterwards. It was *you* who spent the night with Michael Bannister, not Kim Fosse."

"That's ridiculous."

"No, it's not. You told him later that if anyone asked, he'd better say it was Kim Fosse he slept with or you'd tell his wife. You knew Lucy had a weak heart, and he thought such a shock might kill her."

Norma had turned a shade paler. Banks scratched the small scar beside his right eye. Often, when it itched, it was telling him he was on the right track. "As it turns out," he went on, "Lucy Bannister was well aware that her husband occasionally went with other women. It was just something they didn't talk about. He thought he was protecting her feelings; she thought she was protecting his. I suggested they talk about it."

"Bastard," Norma Cheverel hissed. Banks didn't know whether she meant him or Michael Bannister.

"You seduced Michael Bannister, and you planted incriminating photographs on Kim Fosse's living room table *after* you'd killed her in the hope that we would think her husband had done it in a jealous rage, a rage that you also helped set us up to believe. We've checked

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the processing services, too. I'm sure you chose Fotomat because it's busy, quick, and impersonal, but the man behind the counter remembers *you* picking up a film on Wednesday, not Kim Fosse. Beauty has its drawbacks, Norma."

Norma got up, tossed back her hair, and went to pour herself a drink. She didn't offer Banks or Susan anything. "You've got a nerve," she said. "And a hell of an imagination. You should work in television."

"You knew that David Fosse walked the dog every evening, come rain or shine, between six forty-five and seven-thirty. It was easy for you to drive over to the house, park your car a little distance away, get the unsuspecting Kim to let you in, then hit her with the trophy and plant the photos. Then all you had to do was convince us of her infidelity and her husband's violent jealousy. There was even a scrap of truth in it. Except you didn't bargain for Lucy Bannister, did you?"

"This is ridiculous," Norma said. "What about the film in the camera? You can't prove any of this."

"I don't believe I mentioned that there was a film *in* the camera," said Banks, "but we'll leave that for the moment. I'm sure it seemed like a brilliant idea at the time, but that film couldn't possibly have been taken in that camera, or Michael Bannister wouldn't have had red eyes."

"This is just circumstantial."

"Possibly. But it all adds up. Believe me, Norma, we've got a case, and we've got a good chance of making it stick. I imagine Kim had perhaps had a bit too much to drink that night and you put her to bed. When you did, you also took her room key. At some point during the night, when you'd finished with Michael Bannister, you rewound your film manually until there was only a small strip sticking out of the cassette, then you went to Kim Fosse's room and put it in her camera, taking out whatever film she had taken herself and dumping it."

"Oh, I see. I'm that clever, am I? I suppose you found my fingerprints on this film?"

"The prints were smudged, as you no doubt knew they would be, and you wiped the photographs and camera. I'm sure you wore gloves when you killed Kim Fosse. When you'd loaded the film, you advanced to the correct frame in the dark with the flash off and the lens cap on. That way the double exposure wouldn't affect the film at all."

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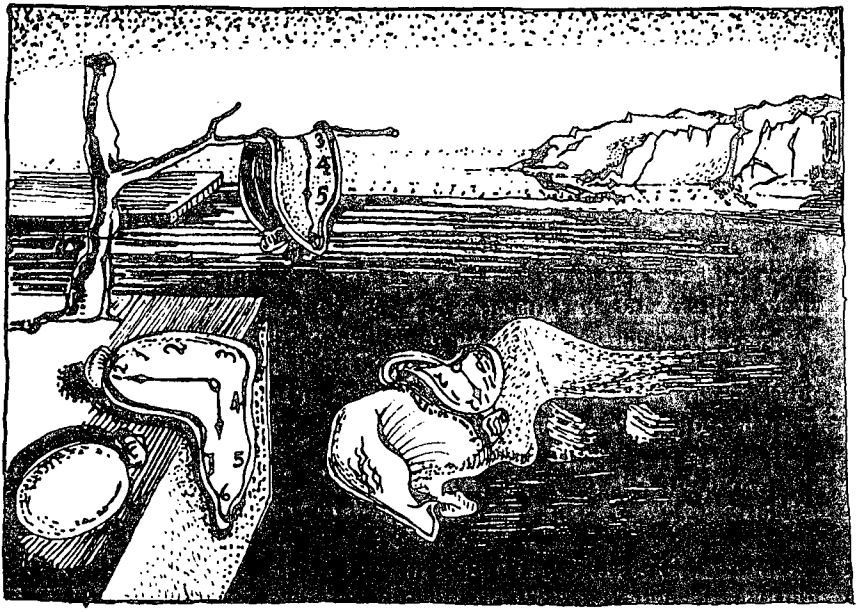
"I'm glad you think I'm so brilliant, Inspector, but I—"

"I don't think you're brilliant at all," Banks said. "You're as stupid as anyone else who thinks she can get away with the perfect crime."

In a flash, Norma Cheverel picked up the ashtray and threw it at Banks. He dodged sideways and it whizzed past his ear and smashed into the front of the cocktail cabinet.

Banks stood up. "Time to call the solicitor, Norma."

But Norma Cheverel wasn't listening. She was banging her fists on her knees and chanting, "Bastard! Bastard!" over and over again.



COME, COME, MAJOR— DID NOTHING PECULIAR STRIKE YOU ABOUT THE TIME?

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After retiring from Maryland Public Television, where he was director of development and information services and had a hand in launching, among other things, Wall Street Week, *William Beechcroft, a.k.a. William Hallstead, moved to Florida. The Sunshine State has since become the setting for many of his stories, including this tale of a gangster from up north . . .*

HAMADRYAD

by WILLIAM BEECHCROFT

Ten miles north of Fort Myers—where the Tamiami Trail arrowed through miles of scrub and sand and the fringes of Punta Gorda hadn't shown up yet—Sammy "Little Shot" Pippitone pushed himself straighter behind the wheel of his rented Honda Civic. The Garden of Serpents should be coming up soon, according to the info he'd been given yesterday. Out here in the southwest Florida boondocks, he ought to be able to make the hit Q & E—quick and easy—then zip back down to Southwest Regional and catch a red-eye back north in time for an early breakfast in Manhattan.

Sammy's nickname hadn't come from his smallness, though he wasn't a lot bigger than a slightly oversized jockey. They called him "Little Shot" because he was at the bottom end of the caliber scale from Orlo "Big Shot" Orsini. The Big Shot packed one of the new .50-caliber Desert Eagles, a monster hand-cannon with huge, half-inch-diameter Spear Lawman ammo that would stop a charging rhino if there'd been one up in Queens to try it on. It also made a gut-jarring bang you could hear from Borden Avenue all the way up to 44th, even with heavy traffic.

Sammy Little Shot hated Orlo's kind of slam-bang service. Sammy considered himself an artist at what he did. No big boom. He used a sweet little .25-caliber Sterling Model 300, a six-shot automatic only four and a half inches overall—not much more than eight inches with its fat steel carrot of a noise suppressor threaded to its

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muzzle. Sammy never called the fat carrot a silencer. There was no such thing as a "silencer," but the suppressor cut the Sterling's normal bark to no more than a *sput*. Sammy always placed that little sput just an inch from the mark's skull, just behind the ear. The neat, quiet work of an artist.

He'd gotten the Sterling here in the bag he'd checked through from JFK. The airlines didn't often x-ray checked baggage. If they did, his bag carried a phony name and address tag. And he was always careful to case the crowd at baggage pickup, willing to let the bag stay on the conveyor if he spotted any security waiting. At Southwest Regional, nobody had looked suspicious about anything. A holiday crowd.

There the place was, maybe a mile ahead on the right, a one-story, pink stucco building done in phony Spanish hacienda style. Sammy let the speedometer begin to slip back from sixty-five. The speed limit was fifty-five, but everybody else was topping that. A cream and brown RV blared past to his left as he pulled off the road and found a slot in the sand and crushed-shell parking lot.

Lester Biorkin, the target's name was. Or had been. Now the Federal Witness Program called him Louis Burke, according to Sammy's briefing phone call yesterday. As far as the Family was concerned, the FWP was a great help. The Family had a mole there, and the mole could turn up just about anything they wanted. At the moment, they wanted Biorkin, who had done three hateful things that upset them. First, a year ago he had witnessed from his taxi up in Harlem the disposal by gunshot of Don Dominic Giovanchi. That wouldn't have been bad if Giovanchi's recycling had been handled by one of the Family's routine disposers. But the hit had been made personally by Don Edmundo Carli himself. "I owe him that honor," Don Carli himself had explained it to his worried security pros. Anyway, who'd of thought a dumb taxi driver would be wandering along Lenox Avenue just as Don Carli's .45 brightened the night? Who'd of thought the driver would recognize the distinguished shooter? But worst of all, who'd of thought the hack driver would do the second hateful thing: be dumb enough to testify and put Don Carli himself up the Hudson in Ossining for twenty-five to thirty-five?

Worse. When word from Don Carli himself came down out of Sing Sing, a worker shooter named Skagg had been sent to Miami to take care of Biorkin. Dancing through Biscayne Boulevard traffic a couple of feet behind Biorkin, Skagg went under a gravel truck, or

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so the story went. That was the third hateful thing. Biorkin made it across the highway, but Skagg was roadkill. At that point, the Family decided a worker shooter had been a bad choice, and they contacted a specialist shooter, namely Sammy Little Shot.

Now here Sammy was, sliding one slender, polished black Thom McAn out of the Honda to the dusty parking surface, then the other. Wrong shoes, he knew, but he hadn't had much time to put his wardrobe together for this little swing south. It had been "Five Gs and leave now, or be picky, wait for the next one, and hope you don't starve in between." Nice way the Family had of putting things. So here he was. The blue and white seersucker pants would be okay, the button-down white shirt would pass. The blue poplin jacket was already too hot, but he couldn't take it off because that would expose the handgrip of the Sterling stuck in his waistband.

He left the car unlocked in case he'd need to make a speedy exit, shaded his eyes, and looked up at the facade of the Spanish hacienda. And that was when he felt icy slivers prickle his spine. All through the plane trip down to Fort Myers then back up here by Japanese scooter, he had pushed to the back of his brain just where he had to go to find Biorkin-Burke. The Garden of Serpents was a tourist attraction, a goddamned snakearium, and if there was anything he hated enough to send cold slivers up his arms just by thinking about it, it was a snake. Hated them even worse than bats, and he hated bats enough to try to stay inside after dark—even in Midtown in winter. The bat hate had come from his mother, when he'd been a kid back in Jersey City. One had gotten into her bedroom and she'd gone bonkers, rolling on the floor, screaming it was going to get in her hair and strangle her. When he was older, he knew that probably wouldn't have happened, but it never stopped giving him the shakes. Even now, he couldn't make it all the way through a Dracula movie.

The snake business had started when he was ten. He and a buddy had chased a grass snake under a fence. The buddy ran around the other side, screamed, "I got it!" and stepped on it just as Sammy leaned down with his mouth open. Something green and sour and vile squirted out of the snake's mouth straight into his. He spit and gagged and spit and thought he was going to die.

As Sammy stared up at the big green and pink lettering across the whole front of the Garden of Serpents, he felt that old gagging urge begin to throb in his throat. The letters were decorated with vines—until a second look showed him the vines were snakes, holding each other's tails in their mouths. The sun, low on the horizon

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behind him, made the entwined lettering seem to writhe in its brassy glare. He swallowed his revulsion and walked into the building.

A few tourists fingered the gaudy souvenir display racks that flanked a sales counter on the left side of the tiled lobby. On the right were a pair of restroom doors labeled "Hiss" and "Herss." The entrance to the exhibits was center rear, a heavy solid wood door with a ticket cage just to its left.

He realized he was stalling, hoping that somehow Biorkin would magically appear, walk out to the parking lot, and make things easy. Sammy didn't want to go in there. But Biorkin worked here. He had to be out there doing something or other in the exhibit area. To avoid the guy's leaving through a back door while he stood here wondering about it, Sammy had to make himself go in there. He yanked out his wallet, careful not to expose the gun butt, and handed the five-buck tariff to the bored-looking babe behind the screened ticket window. Then he faced the big, curved-top entrance, took a long, deep breath, and pulled it open.

Years ago he'd read that snakes smell like cucumbers. That might have been a lot of horse hocky, but he could swear that as he stepped through the door, all of a sudden he smelled cucumbers. And there wasn't a snake in sight. He'd expected a big room with cages along the wall. It wasn't like that at all. He walked across a sort of hallway, then he was outdoors again, in a big courtyard open to the darkening sky. The central area was crisscrossed by two brick walks at right angles. The walks intersected in the middle, cutting the yard into four sections. In each section was a—what? Some kind of cinderblock ring. Sammy walked over to the nearest one, his shoes scuffing the tanbark mulch. He peered into the big fifteen-foot-diameter well. His blood turned to instant ice. Down there in the bottom of the six-foot-deep pit was a writhing tangle of fat black snakes. Christ, there must be a hundred of them, Sammy realized.

He stumbled backwards until his feet found brick again. A wave of black dots threatened to black out his vision. He fought it off. Okay. He was okay now. But he sure didn't want to see what was in the other three wells.

The roofed hallway that ran around all four sides of the courtyard was formed by a wall without windows all around the outside, and a low parapet sort of wall around the inside. Widely spaced concrete columns jutted up from the parapet to support the roof's inside edge. All along the outside wall of this open hallway Sammy made out

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rows of glass cages. He was glad the light was getting so bad he couldn't see what was in them.

In a distant corner, a knot of people had gathered around some guy in a white coat. Sammy couldn't spot anybody anywhere else in here, so he walked across the courtyard toward the gathering. He was careful not to throw any careless looks into the two wells he passed on the way.

Standing at the edge of the little crowd down here in the corner, he could see that the short guy in the white coat was working with something on the edge of the parapet. A citizen with ape shoulders moved aside and Sammy saw what was going on. The white-coat guy had a damned snake right out here with everybody. Only his little pole with a hook at the end was between him and the snake.

Sammy was surprised that he knew what kind of snake it was. The flaring hood was a dead giveaway. This skinny little snake man with brushcut gray hair was diddling around with a cobra. A couple of feet of cobra, and the lousy cobra was getting tired of it. It made a lunge for the guy's hand. Just as it did, the guy whipped in with the other hand, and Sammy was goggle-eyed. The bony little snake charmer had the thing by the back of its neck.

"You going to show us the hamadryad this afternoon, Dr. Grosvenor?" The speaker was a brainy-looking teenager crowding right in on the cobra act.

"Afraid not, son." The snake doctor had a voice as dry as scales on leaves. "We bring him out only on Sundays."

Sammy wondered vaguely what in hell a "hammer dry head" was, but his attention came back to the matter at hand in a hurry. From the shadows behind the parapet an arm reached out to give the snake wrestler a glass flask with rubber stretched across its mouth. The guy with a handful of cobra brought the flask up to the snake, and it zapped its fangs deep in the rubber top. Sammy was revolted, but he couldn't make himself look away as the yellowish venom drooled down the inside of the glass. The snake's glittery little eyes looked like he was having a fine old time sinking his fangs into something.

Then Sammy shook his head to break the tight little string of horror that had tied him to the cobra. And he got a look at the guy who'd handed out the flask.

He was tall, with neatly styled black hair and sharp green eyes in the kind of face Sammy had seen as mercenary of the month on *Soldiers for Hire* magazine. Just the kind of good-looking, overcon-

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fident guy Sammy liked to whack. "Gives me a lot of satisfaction," he had relayed back to Don Carli up there in 'Sing. What he didn't say, but knew was true, was that whacking a guy like Biorkin here made up some for Sammy's being so little that everybody was always looking down at the top of his head.

While the spidery snake doctor went on with his show for the tourist trade, Sammy edged over to the parapet where the glass-flask supply ace was idling now that he'd had his big moment. Yeah, this was sure as hell who he'd come here for. Sammy recognized him from the photo the Family had thoughtfully provided.

He felt so good about it, so pleased at the way this was working out, that he smiled at the target and said quietly, "Hi, Biorkin." Call it bravado or whatever, it was his trademark. The murmured greeting with a big smile just before the whack. It confused them, and a confused target was an easy target.

Biorkin didn't react at all. Maybe he hadn't even heard him. Too bad. For Sammy the edge was gone now, and the rest of this would be nothing more than mechanics.

Dr. Brushcut was folding up his act now, and Sammy stayed on the fringe of the crowd as it ambled to the big courtyard door. Near the door, though, he drifted off to the left, then fitted himself neatly behind the roof column in the southwest corner of the yard.

Everybody was out of the place now except for the snake charmer and Biorkin, who was obviously his assistant. Having the two of them in here made things dicey. Then Sammy heard the doc call out, "Good night, Lou," and he made out the little snaker walking up the hallway on the other side of the courtyard. The light was getting really bad now. The guy turned the corner and came straight down the west hall toward Sammy. But, as Sammy had figured, the snake doctor stopped at the main door, pushed it open, and stepped out of the exhibit yard into the lobby.

This was beautiful, Sammy realized. Only he and "Lou" Biorkin were left in here. Couldn't have engineered a better setup if he'd planned it.

He listened. The courtyard was dead silent. Had Biorkin somehow slipped out with the crowd? Or maybe out the back? Sammy racked his memory. Was there a back door down there?

Then he heard a rattle. A rattle!! Come on, calm down, he ordered himself. Rattlesnakes don't make door noises. There *was* a door back there, and son of a bitch Biorkin was going through it!

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Sammy sprinted down the south hallway, first running flat out, then getting a lot more careful as he realized he was ramming along only a foot from the snake cages that lined the outside wall.

He skittered around the southeast corner of the corridor, raced along the east side, and—hell, here it was, a rear door. He shoved down the panic bar. The door wouldn't budge. It was locked by a key-operated deadbolt. Biorkin had gone out this way, now Sammy had to run all the way back to the main entrance and—

Wait a minute! What was that? He turned toward the courtyard and listened. Footsteps. Sounded like they were going up the north corridor toward the door. The guy was still in here! He'd locked this rear door from the inside, and he was still in here.

Then Sammy heard the stealthy footsteps pause. There was a grating noise, like wood sliding on concrete, and Biorkin's padding steps picked up again, heading for the main entrance.

Sammy launched himself straight up the middle of the courtyard. Biorkin was still over on the north side, and if Sammy was quick enough, he could reach the main door the same time Biorkin did.

At the midpoint, where the two walkways intersected, Sammy's leather-soled shoes slipped. He went down on one knee, cracking it painfully against the bricks. He'd told himself he ought to start wearing rubber soles, but he hadn't found a pair that looked decent. He was up again almost as soon as he'd gone down, but the slip had cost him. He caught a dim glimpse of Biorkin's white coat as the big main door opened, a flash of the lobby lighting, then the door slammed shut again.

Biorkin was in the lobby, no doubt racing for his car. Now Sammy would have to go out there, get in his own car, tail him until he pulled into his driveway or stopped at some store on the way home, and improvise from there. This thing was getting more complicated than Sammy liked. He reached the end of the main walkway and lunged for the door.

Locked. He shook the handle. Locked with a keyed deadbolt like the door behind him.

This was crazy. Him, Sammy Little Shot Pippitone, the world's greatest snake hater, locked in with a world-class snake population. He sagged against the door, pulled great ragged breaths, and tried not to go into giggle-sob hysterics. Wait till Big Shot Orsini heard about this! There'd be no end to the ragging Sammy'd have to take.

He tried to concentrate on that funny side of it, but there was no getting around what was going on here. He had let a dumb-ass taxi

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jock outflank him and lock him in here with hundreds of—

A hot needle of panic speared through Sammy's tumbling brain. He banged on the door with both fists. "Let me outta here! I'm locked in. Let me OUT!"

He put his ear to the door. Nothing. Biorkin must have been the last person in the place, and now he was gone. Sammy slowly turned and faced the courtyard. Silence. Silence blanketed by darkness thick as a quilt. He could barely make out the rim of the courtyard wall against the overcast, starless night. To his right, almost at his elbow, it seemed, he heard the faint jitter of scales against something dry. A snake over there was shifting around in his cage. An icy tremor skittered down Sammy's back.

A flicker of dim blue light silhouetted the east wall of the courtyard. What could— Then distant thunder rumbled. He felt it more than heard it, felt it through the thin soles of his city Thom McAns. Did the snakes feel it, too? All around him, he heard rustlings and twitchings.

He didn't belong here, for Chrissake! Not here in snake city, Florida, ten miles from nowhere.

Out on the Tamiami Trail, a truck howled past. There were people going by not a hundred yards away, but he might as well be on the moon.

Come on, Sammy, think. He backed tight against the door. At least this way nothing could sneak up behind him. Climb out of here, maybe? The only access to the roof over the perimeter hallway was up one of the supporting columns. If they'd been narrow enough to get a grip around, he might have been able to shinny up to the roof. But the columns were too thick for that.

Lightning flickered again. The seconds between flash and rumble were fewer. Damned storm was getting closer. Like he needed that on top of all his immediate problems.

Slow down, Sammy, he urged himself. There were only two problems: get out of here, then whack Biorkin. He wasn't too worried about the Biorkin part. He had a line on where the guy lived, and the Family had feelers everywhere in case Biorkin skipped. Like he had in Miami. The big problem was right now: getting out of this hell hole before he went . . . batty.

He would have to think of that! And this was worse than Dracula's castle. There you only had to worry about the count. Here he was surrounded by hundreds of creepy fang-bearers. The image of the cobra biting into the rubber-topped bottle flashed vividly to mind.

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How could the snake doctor get himself to even *touch* the damned cobra? How many cobras were in here with him? What was in the other three wells? Did the snakes out there crawl out of their pits at night and—

Jesus, what was *that!*

Somewhere over to his left, he'd heard a grating noise, loud and long, like somebody pulling a fire hose around a corner. *That* sure hadn't been a snake in a cage. It was right out here in the—

Forked lightning flared overhead, strobed the courtyard white. Seconds after darkness fell back in, he could still see it burned in his eyeballs. Empty, thank God, the walkways making a giant cross.

That'd keep old Dracula away, he thought inanely. Then thunder exploded like a ton of TNT going off.

His ears sizzled from the blast. No, that wasn't his ears. It was a hiss. He had definitely heard a hiss. And damned close. Just to his left.

He was *out* of here!

As Sammy leaped into the empty courtyard, he felt something hit his right knee. Then his left shoulder. Soft impacts, but terrifying. Then his face was struck, and he almost laughed through his fright. Raindrops, that's what was hitting him. Nothing but big, fat raindrops.

He stumbled to the center of the courtyard as the scattered drops became a downpour. Then a deluge. The cascading sheets were shot through with jagged spears of lightning that threw the walkways and the concrete-ringed serpent wells into brilliance that blinded him for seconds afterward.

Hunched against the storm's beating downpour, squinting into its lightning flares, soaked and shivering, Sammy shoved his right hand under his sopping jacket and jerked out the Sterling automatic. He was sure now that something was loose here, something more terrifying than anything he'd seen in the cages. He didn't know what it was, didn't even want to imagine, but he knew it was here because he could *feel* it, just like he would have felt a hidden shooter from the rival Giovanchi Family.

But there was something worse than a Giovanchi shooter in here, something that made the hairs on his neck stand straight out. With the pistol held in both hands, Sammy crouched, swung around wildly in the inky blackness. What could—

Lightning strobed twice, only a fraction of a second each time, but it etched into Sammy's retinas a sight so incredible, so terrifying, that Sammy froze tight.

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The thing stood taller than Sammy in his shooting crouch. It swayed there, ghostly white with gleaming eyes that stared down at Sammy as hard and merciless as bronze chips.

Dracula! Sammy thought wildly. The crossed sidewalks didn't mean a thing. For a frozen moment, he crouched motionless, praying that what he'd seen had been an illusion, a figment of panic.

Then his stunned brain jerked back on track and he pulled the trigger. He got off just one wild shot as the hellish apparition crashed in over his extended arms and sank daggers deep into his neck.

"Found him just like that," Doctor of Herpetology Herman Grosvenor told Charlotte County Sheriff Duncan Bosworth. They stood in the center of the courtyard, flanking the body of the little man in the sodden poplin jacket and seersucker trousers; the little man with two widely spaced, bloody punctures in his neck. Nearby, two more men in county sheriff's uniforms were supposed to be checking for "clues," but mostly they stared into the snake wells with obvious distaste.

"And the hama-whatever, you say you found him out of his cage?" Sheriff Bosworth was a big man with a florid face, but Grosvenor could see that under the lacework of beer-bloated capillaries, the sheriff was pale as paste.

"Hamadryad," Dr. Grosvenor amended. "When I got here, I found him footloose and fancy free." He looked down at the body. "I don't know who this unfortunate fellow is, or how he got locked in here. Found him just like this when I opened up this morning."

"Who was the last one to leave last night?" the sheriff asked as he crouched and kind of aimlessly fingered the deceased's neck.

"My assistant, Lou Burke. Oh, you mean, could he have left the cage open? Not him, he's a detail man. It's more likely this fellow came in a misguided effort to steal the hamadryad and it got out of hand."

"The thing's worth money?"

"Well up in five figures, Sheriff." Dr. Grosvenor frowned. "Funny thing about Lou, though. He called in just after I called you, said an emergency had come up, and he had to quit."

The sheriff looked up from his crouch. "Quit?"

"As of today. Said he'd be back in touch to tell me where to send his severance check."

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"I'll check on him, but I can't say I blame anybody for giving up this kind of showbiz." Bosworth stood and gazed uneasily around the courtyard. "You're sure you corralled that hama-whatever?"

"Hamadryad, Sheriff. Our king cobra. I can't imagine how he got loose, but he's safely back in his cage. All eighteen feet of him."

"That's some hell of a snake!"

Dr. Grosvenor smiled like a proud parent. "The only snake, I like to say, that can rear up and look you straight in the eye."

DETECTIVERSE

MOTHER GOOSE MAYHEM

Jack Be Nimble

by B. E. C.

Jack be nimble, Jack be quick.
Jack get out your stabbing-stick.
Get out your switchblade; get out your gun.
Get out your chains; we'll have some fun.

The other gang's already there.
Right on the corner, and they won't fight fair.
You're the boss! Let's knock 'em dead!
Shoot, Jack! Fill 'em full of lead!

Uh, oh! Too late. The fuzz are here.
They're shooting, too, and well, I fear.
Too bad. Poor sod. They've hit their mark.
Jack's just become a copper's mark.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

The female cop has become such a familiar figure on the street, we may be inclined to forget that her lot within the force can still be difficult—especially when she's paired with the likes of Jeffry Scott's PC Kit LePage . . .

WINE IS A MOCKER

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Drunks are funny. Ask generations of clowns, cabaret artistes, or writers scrabbling around for light relief. Cue the rumpled Man-about-town, screwing a cigarette into his ear, fumbling with a lighter, and then solemnly igniting the tip of his necktie.

In real life, your average benighted boozer, slurred of speech and double of vision, tends to be an embarrassment. Or due to irrational rages over imagined slights, an outright menace. Sadly, city coppers find it hard to laugh, but then they know of too many maimed innocents, and the occasional grieving widow whose life has been altered for the worse by a gush of alcohol.

In the criminal triangle of London between Rosetta Street, Great Northern Prospect, and Cap-a-Pie Lane, comical drunks are a rarity. What with joblessness, inner-city poverty, and abundant slums, everything around the Rosetta is more serious, somehow. Intoxicated men and women adrift on the street are seldom arrested—who needs the paperwork—but they are treated with caution and strongly, often colourfully advised to get off out of it.

Constable Kit LePage and Constable Angela Farrington wanted no truck with drunks. They were on patrol in the maze of alleys, mews, and courtyards behind Great Northern Prospect. It demanded much trudging. Their feet hurt. It was about one in the morning

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and they had, as the ancient Met' Police slang goes, shaken hands with several hundred doors, checking that they were locked. Since half the premises were derelict anyway, wretched little stores and two-room workshops killed by the endless recession, the task struck them as futile. However, there was a bit of a purge on about burglaries.

Kit LePage quite liked the futility part. PC LePage, while not exactly idle, was what is known in the trade as a uniform-carrier or warm body. He did what he was told, fading away when volunteers were called for or messy duties could be avoided. He welcomed a simple assignment unlikely to require decision-making, undue effort, much chance of action. Angela Farrington, stuck-up little cow, had been fuming throughout their shift, for the same reasons. She was worryingly intelligent, not to mention ambitious (a word sounding like a disease when uttered by PC LePage), and lusted after CID work.

Had she been dense as concrete and apathetic as a pebble, Kit LePage would still have disliked Angela. She was female, for a start. And reasonably sexy in a chubby, twinkling-eyed, jaunty manner. PC LePage was all for that, naturally. But Angela Farrington was sexy etcetera *and unavailable,* which he could not forgive. Asked for a date (Kit LePage kept being told he ought to try male modelling, so he was fully aware of the opportunity being bestowed on a fairly tiresome young woman), PC Farrington had smiled sweetly and stated that she would rather spend a year subjected to the sexual whims of gorillas than endure so much as a nanosecond off duty with him.

He wasn't surprised, Kit LePage told anyone who would listen and many who jeeringly refused to do any such thing. He had pegged Farrington as a lesbian soon as he clapped eyes on her. He'd just been testing his suspicion.

Further, there was the matter of PC Angela Farrington being upper class, or letting on to be. She had that blah accent, marbles in the mouth. A couple of women officers had spent the weekend at her parents' place, reporting that it was a stately home as near as made no odds, ever so old, ever so big, though a touch shabby, and there were real servants, just like in Edwardian costume dramas on the telly.

If there was one thing PC LePage couldn't stand, he discovered on hearing that, it was a posh tart playing at coppers until she reverted to type and married a millionaire or a title, probably both.

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Ah yes, Farrington and LePage made a great team.

Another thing getting up Kit LePage's nose was Angela's popularity at work. Everybody liked her, from sarcastic Inspector Caradoc and thuggish-looking Sergeant Nick Flinders, to the rest of the Woodentops, the uniformed people. Whereas PC LePage, who as far as he could make out was a terrific guy, seemed to get Angela Farrington's rightful share of snubs and ribbing as well as his own. . . . Weird: he'd been on the Rosetta for two years, she was green, yet she was accepted and he was treated like rubbish.

For some weeks before the Night of the Drunk, a conviction had been growing within Kit LePage. If Angela Farrington came unstuck, blundered and became discredited, then his career would turn around. It wasn't logical, but in his heart he knew it had to be that way.

They were pacing along Duck Street, PC LePage musing on how nice it would be if some of that insecure, crumbling brickwork fell on Angela's head—not to kill her, mind; say a year in hospital, slow her down a trifle—when she startled him by stopping dead. "Did you hear that?"

"No," he said, without thought or analysis. Jobwise, it was one of PC LePage's favorite responses, way ahead of "I'm off watch, boss" or "It's not up to me, get someone else."

But then he did hear it. They were standing at the entry to Persever Lane, no more than a slot between the walls of adjoining buildings, which led onto Henry Court and another dead end, Absolam Rents. Persever Lane had echo-chamber qualities when the city was so quiet, and LePage caught a sound akin to autumn leaves blowing across the flagstones, down there beyond the radius of the nearest street lamp. But it wasn't autumn, and in any case, Persever Lane had no trees.

What the sound might well be, was of feet uncertain and faltering, or tippytoe stealthy. Before he could repeat the denial, Angela Farrington nipped into the alley and shone her torch, calling in a harsh, far from cute and sexy way: "Stay where you are! Police."

"Bloody hell," LePage groaned. "You should hear yourself. Come on, it's only a cat or something."

"Some cat," she said. The torch had a hell of a beam. It showed, fifty or sixty yards down Persever Lane, a shoulder, an ear, some disordered hair, and one leg from the knee down. "Come on out," she ordered.

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And the quarry obeyed, half toppling from a distant doorway. He kept one hand on its jamb, swinging like an urchin twirling round a pole. PC LePage activated his own torch as Angela gasped and flinched, then he advanced. The man froze for an instant, free hand thrown up to shade his eyes.

He was young, well, youngish, with a lot of fair hair and a lot of nose and very little in the way of chin. His tie was pulled down and one point of shirt collar stuck up in a fang. The Armani suit was grievously creased and crumpled, not just fashionably baggy, and PC LePage, who cared about such things, estimated that the leather loafers had cost more than his, LePage's, weekly salary.

"Ah, poleesh," the man mumbled to himself, evidently relieved. He was equally evidently high, or well on the way thither. For he added, unaware of expressing it aloud, "Watch your step with the coppers, my boy."

PC LePage went closer, although still beyond swinging, kicking, or throwing-up range. From there, the reek of whisky was palpable as aftershave laid on too enthusiastically.

The man gulped and took an almost visible grip on himself. Suddenly his articulation was prim. "I'm not driving, you know. Left the car at home, cabbed it here, knew it'd be a heavy night." Gawd, Kit LePage told himself disgustedly, more marbles in the mouth, another Hooray Henry.

Flicking a glance over his shoulder, he was mildly surprised to see that PC Farrington was hanging back. Not bothering to lower his voice, LePage jeered, "Don't be scared, luv, just a twit who's sloshed." His tone turned hectoring: "Long way from home aren't you, sunshine? What have you been getting up to, then?"

"Nothing!" The drunk spread his arms wide, reeled, and clutched the doorjamb again. "Woah . . . Not my scene, these parts, you've got me there. Friends from the office, wanted to see life inna raw, an' this is outshide lav'tory of universh, ri'?" He gulped again, and remembered to take trouble with his words. "Sorry, it's where you do your work and very grateful we all are. But it is fair-to-middling squalid . . . Why we came, of course. Some desperate pubs, truly groteshk, *grotesque,* then a club back there."

He gestured vaguely. "Strip club, ghastly joint. The girls were enough to put you off sex for . . . ooh, five minutes." He giggled, then frowned sternly. "Just kidding. The others, rotten devils, left me in the lurch when I started feeling . . . you know, queasy. Been trying to get back to civilisation ever since, reg'lar lab-ab-arinth here, little

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street into little street into little . . . " He seemed pleased with his new mantra, content to repeat it indefinitely.

"Never mind that. Let's see some ID, chum."

"Be my guest." The man delved inside his jacket and thrust a wallet at LePage. "All in there, driver's lishens, cre' cards, the good ol' plashtic cash . . . Gavin Huxtable, Huxtable the name, banking the game. Treat me right, I'll leash, *lease* you a jumbo jet."

"Put it away," PC LePage snapped, returning the billfold. "You people . . . Flashing money around, and legless at that. Wonder you haven't been mugged, stupid great berk."

PC Farrington drifted up behind. "Run him in," she urged in a bossy whisper. "He's drunk as the proverbial skunk."

"Shuddup, I'll decide whether he's worth nicking." Kit LePage wheeled round and scowled at Angela. Unprecedentedly, this form of negotiating worked, for she retreated into the shadows.

PC LePage was thinking that they might be able to contact an area car to transport a prisoner back to Rosetta Street. But probably not. Meaning a long trek back with nauseous Mr. Huxtable, then the aggravation of booking him and waiting for a doctor to rule whether he was suitable for temporary confinement and . . . and . . . and . . . Horrible.

Interfering PC Farrington had made him lose his thread. Oho, yes, that was it. "Which club, sunshine? There's no strip club down here."

Gavin Huxtable smeared a sleeve across his forehead. "Is it very sultry tonight?" he asked plaintively. "Which club? It had a yellow door, I know that. The manager got nasty when I, um, made emergency use of a fire bucket. So I got out pretty smartly, the way one does. Down a passage, the door said, 'Push bar for exit,' so I did, but it was just a courtyard affair. Posse behind me, very dodgy moment. I climbed over the wall and dropped into this blessed maze."

"Yellow Mandarin, must of been, that backs on Henry Court. They'd have loved you there, carrying on like Lord Muck and acting the hooligan." PC LePage shook his head. "Your sort are reckoned to set an example, and look at the state of you! Very nice it'll look in court tomorrow, eh? Drunk and disorderly, committing a public nuisance, like as not. That'll do your prospects a power of good at the bank."

Huxtable whined, "I did leave the car at home, officer. . . . Look, I'm only trying to get home. Give a chap a break."

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Kit LePage pretended to ponder. It occurred to him that if Angela Farrington had not been around, he could have had a laugh with Huxtable—knocked him down and trodden on his fingers in helping the prat up, before really telling him a thing or three and kicking his backside all the way along Persever Lane. As it was . . .

"All right, I'm a fool to myself. Go along that way—look where I'm pointing, dummy—turn right, and there's a mini-cab office. They'll get you home. Off you go, chop-chop!"

Huxtable obeyed, though more slowly than recommended, nearly bumping into Angela Farrington. Head averted, she jinked out of his way. LePage gloated, watching the idiot stumble away with one shoulder scraping along the alley's wall, ruining the Armani jacket. Kit LePage made the bright sword of his torch's beam skid and dance around the clown's feet, so that he shied and staggered. Finally the idiot reached Duck Street. "Your other right," LePage yelled, "not that way." And then Gavin Huxtable was gone.

"Disgraceful," PC Farrington remarked coldly, a minute later. They were out on the main street again; the night had slid into that depressing London-summer state of "trying to rain" while remaining warm, coating everything with a fine, sweaty film. "Serve you right if that man complains once he sobers up and remembers how you ranted at him."

Women! "You wanted him nicked, now I'm disgraceful for doing him a good turn. Fat lot of good a complaint would be: his word against ours, right? Don't get iffy on me, gel. We back each other up in this job."

She shrugged again. "If you say so." Staring along Duck Street to where the mini-cab company's neon sign scrawled a Chinese pattern on the slick road surface, Angela said casually, "Bet you a fiver that guy never went into the cab office. Drunk as he was, he shouldn't have got far . . . But there's no sign of him in either direction, and we can see a long way."

PC LePage gaped at her. She smiled demurely. "Now you're getting the idea. Soon as he turned the corner out of Persever Lane, our Mr. Huxtable ran like hell." And as if to herself, though it wasn't: "I hope you weren't too busy blustering at him and ogling all that green in his wallet to make a note of his address."

"No bother," Kit LePage lied. He hadn't even opened the driving licence, just checked the name on three different credit cards. Gavin Huxtable, G. J. Huxtable, and Gavin Huxtable, what could be fairer than that?

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They heard the vehicles before the little convoy came into sight. It was led by a white Ford Escort, unmarked in the sense of having no police badges, but notably grimy. That was Detective Sergeant Nick Flinders's chariot. Just behind was an anonymous Rover 3.5, considerably cleaner, Detective Inspector Caradoc's personal transport. In shotgun position rolled a Met' Police mini-bus carrying half a dozen officers.

All three units were being driven with unobtrusive haste, no flashing lamps or sirens, and despite their speed, were using parking lights only. Making the right-angled turn into Duck Street, each one slowed to avoid squealing tires. For anyone in the trade, either side of the law, the train might just as well have flown a banner announcing, "Raid in progress."

PC Kit LePage, seeing the convoy slow to a crawl before turning sharp right around the far corner of Duck Street, took in the implications. Stomach churning, he gabbled, "Listen, we never saw that bloke. Never saw a thing. Just a routine patrol."

"Interesting concept," PC Farrington commented, still in thinking-aloud mode. "So we falsify our Incident Books, is that it?" She shook her head, adding almost kindly, "Don't be daft, Kit. Bad enough to seem incompetent and gullible, without adding dishonesty to the bill. Come on, we'd better join the party, bring Mr. Caradoc up to speed."

Such a cheerful tone made LePage yearn to shake her warmly . . . by the throat. She was already hurrying along the street, he could tell that she would be immune to entreaty or argument. Dimly he understood that he was at the undesirable end of a biter-bit deal—PC Obnoxious Farrington had come unstuck, just as he'd daydreamed, but pleasing fantasies had not included his own involvement in the disaster.

"It's ironic, really," Detective Inspector Caradoc lectured dreamily. "We turn the rosters upside down, run up enough overtime payments to give the Suits a nervous breakdown, we saturate the manor with coppers after dark, all in the cause of hammering burglary. And the most notable result to date? Two of our finest let a big fish get away. Here's a fellow in the wrong place at the wrong time, ought to have stuck out like a sore thumb, and you're so sweet and understanding that I'm surprised one of you didn't offer him cab fare off this patch."

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Caradoc, with his black patent-leather hair, nightclub pallor, and soulful eyes, had the look of a silent-movies star in need of a shave. He was presiding over a drumhead court-martial in the CID room at Rosetta Street nick, flanked by Nick Flinders and Night Station Sergeant Grant, with PC Angela Farrington standing before them. PC LePage was downstairs, waiting his turn. The lions, Angela told herself, wanted to trash the Christians one at a time, thereby squeezing twice the sadistic fun from the proceedings . . .

"You might as well know," Caradoc went on, "that a burglar got into Gruntons tonight. Big old house in Duck Street, looks like lodgings but isn't. It runs a long way back, narrow frontage, room after room behind. The rear wall of Gruntons, funnily enough, forms one side of Absalom Rents—which is reached from Persever Lane, where you happened on that man."

Nick Flinders cut in, "Gruntons doesn't look much, but they make hi-tech instruments. Customers all over the world, space-satellite gear and such. Inside, it's state of the art, sterile areas, labs. The basement's a vault. Gruntons uses precious metals, you see. The raider was after about a million quidsworth of gold and platinum."

"Huxtable wasn't carrying anything bulky, Sarge. Else I would have stopped him there and then."

Inspector Caradoc snorted, "Twenty-twenty hindsight! He didn't get the stuff, no thanks to you, and we didn't get him. Which *was* thanks to you and LePage. Huxtable—that won't be his real name—climbed up to the roof, went in through the tiles, and straight down to the vault. He tripped a silent alarm, though. And knew it, more's the pity. This is a cool one, a pro, ready to cut his losses and switch to Plan B: left his gear and got out in a hurry. Of course, he hadn't planned on walking into you two bright sparks, but as it turned out, that wasn't a problem."

"Sir, we've never been warned about Gruntons. Knowing a high-value site was on our beat would have affected my—"

Grant, her immediate boss, stirred angrily. He was a decent stick, but terribly sergeant-majorly, Orders is Orders and Silence in the Ranks There. Caradoc, patting his arm, stalled the reprimand. "Fair enough, I suppose. Policy, my dear—'Need to know' is part of good security. Why advertise the fact that Gruntons has bank-type assets but less than bank-branch defenses, good as they are? And in theory, you protect all premises with equal diligence. Ha bloody ha."

Angela Farrington took a deep breath. "Sir, I haven't had a chance to explain. It isn't as bad as . . . I mean, there was method in my madness. Honestly."

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"This'll be good," Nick Flinders predicted. But he sounded more encouraging than sceptical.

Colouring, PC Farrington said, "The thing is, I recognised him straightaway. His name isn't Huxtable, he's Roddy Muldeoun, that's e-o-u-n at the end, but you say it Muldoon." I'm babbling, she thought; cut to the chase, or they'll think you're a featherhead.

"He's related to Lord Raven, second cousin, great-nephew, or something. Lives on the family estate in Sussex. Very top-drawer; I believe he could use an honorary title and he'll inherit a proper one, eventually. The point is, he was the last person who should have been wandering around Persever Lane at one in the morning."

Inspector Caradoc leaned forward. "And so? If you made him, he must have recognised you."

"No, I only know him because my sister had a terrible crush on Roddy Muldeoun, all the girls at her school did. He used to ride morning exercise for a racehorse stables and they'd see him going past the gates. . . . She showed me his picture in *Tatler* a few years ago. I've seen him in the distance at parties a couple of times since. He was so out of place tonight, and I had a hunch . . . so I let PC LePage make the running and stayed behind him most of the time. Muldeoun's never been introduced to me, and anyway, people look at the uniform, they skip one's face."

"That's true." Nick Flinders nodded. "Okay, you kept out of the light. Soon as he started the I'm-Huxtable moody, why didn't you challenge him on it? Or alert LePage?"

"I wanted to see what Muldeoun would say, Sarge. Get an idea of what he was up to. I *knew* who he really was, you see. I know where he lives. So I—we—had him on a string. I'd have told Kit the strength of it, later. I wondered whether it wasn't something to do with drugs . . . he could have been on his way to or from a meet with his dealer. It seemed better to play dumb, and maybe open some lines of inquiry for CID."

Caradoc, joined forefingers tapping his lower lip, brooded for a few seconds. PC Farrington rushed on, "I had an edge, knowing he was lying, so it wasn't that smart of me to peg him as bogus. Stank of drink, but when he brushed past, there was none on his breath. And it was a brilliant drunk act, that wavering between clarity and muzziness, and he was sort of laying himself open for Kit, PC LePage, to rubbish him . . . but it *was* an act."

After a hesitation she admitted, "I was held back by embarrassment at first, sir. Roddy Muldeoun's the first punter, er, member

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of the public I've encountered who . . . um, fits into a personal context. Slightly, but I did sort of know him. So I dithered a bit.

"Then he started flashing those Huxtable credit cards, and obviously he wasn't just improvising, trying to keep his name out of the papers. Muldeoun had a pretty elaborate, sophisticated cover ready. Suggesting he had to be up to something major." Angela Farrington blushed again. "That's as much as I'd worked out when you turned up."

Sergeant Grant, eyebrows down in a single bar, declared, "I've never heard anything like this from one of my men, all right, my people—personal contexts and sophisticated covers, ruddy John le Carré stuff from a beat officer!" His face cleared and he chuckled rustily. "All the same, smart work, lassie."

"Thank you for sharing that with us, Sid." However, Inspector Caradoc's expression hinted at approval. "You know where he lives, sure of that?"

"Egelshawe Court in Tyrham, it's a village on the South Coast. 'Huxtable' shares the Dower House with his widowed mother, it's just down the road from my sister's old school."

"Right, for the moment keep your trap shut, my dear. Not a word to anyone, even LePage. Go straight home," Caradoc decreed.

The sky was paling towards dawn as Caradoc finished the last of a series of phone calls. "Nothing I like better than rousing colleagues from a sound sleep. I'm awake, why should they be better off?"

Nick Flinders, hands in pockets and feet on desk, yawned agreement. "Does it fly, skipper?"

"Like a bird, with any luck. There is a Roddy Muldeoun living where she says. Sussex CID has been turning a wistful eye his way—guy has a lavish lifestyle, runs a top-of-the-line Jag and a Range Rover, takes long vacations, but there's no family money, all he stands to inherit is death duties and debts. Sussex was wondering about drugs, but now it looks like big-time robbery."

"Just as well young Angela didn't jump in and feel his collar, then," Flinders pointed out. "Sprig of the nobility, no criminal record . . . all right, he's produced false documents and been found near the scene of a break-in. So what? A good brief would come up with high spirits, a Hooray Henry on a pub crawl, teasing the stupid coppers, and Muldeoun would be cleared. Whoever went after that gold and platinum left no prints, just an anonymous set of tools."

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"Oh yes, she did well. Bob Friern's over the moon; you know how his squad loves cloak-and-daggery. Muldeoun has been a Target"—Caradoc broke off to consult his watch—"for the past four minutes. Muldeoun wouldn't have tried pulling tonight's stroke on his own. There must have been a getaway driver waiting, and a mule or mules standing by to help him carry the stuff out once the vault was cracked. Plus the fence, of course. And an inside man at Gruntons, stands to reason. Superintendent Friern revels in all that; softly softly catchee monkey. He reckons that patient, extended surveillance on Muldeoun will lead him to the entire firm. They'll get together to argue over what went wrong."

Caradoc rolled his eyes. "Crafty little madam, that Angela. Note her artless admission that she needled Lippy LePage to bust so-called Huxtable, calculating that was the one thing which would guarantee the bloke's release. Thank God LePage wasn't on his own tonight, he'd have screwed the whole thing up. Either felt Muldeoun's collar, which was pointless, or let him go and never mentioned the fact."

"LePage," Nick Flinders asserted heavily, "is useless. I wouldn't mind that, the Job's packed with useless fellers, but he's slimy with it, dead irritating . . . "

Inspector Caradoc didn't bother acknowledging a statement of the obvious. Instead he stretched until muscles cracked. "Not a bad night, Nick. Tasty result in sight, and Bob Friern owes me one for it. Always useful, having Serious Crimes Squad in your debt. And that girl's a bit of a discovery, unless tonight was a fluke. Winning all round, for a change."

PC Kit LePage was no gambler, he felt it was a mug's game to take avoidable risks. So he assured himself that he wasn't about to embark on a gamble.

Ever since he and PC Angela Farrington had hurried round the block, located Inspector Caradoc's party, and confessed their sin, LePage had been nursing a theory. He didn't believe it was strong or convincing; on the other hand, when waste products impacted with the air conditioning, Kit LePage followed the Octopus Strategy. Were hiding or running out of the question, then the great thing was to cloud the water.

PC LePage was puzzled, then timidly optimistic when Angela Farrington never returned from her inquisition. If she'd talked back, and she did have that tendency, the bosses might well have sus-

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pended her instantly, packed her off in disgrace. His spirits dived when he reasoned that PC Farrington was only half of the team, and if they'd thrown the book at her, his prospects were just as dire. Sauce for the gander, sauce for the goose.

Unless . . . His theory, and the ploy founded on it, seemed more tempting by the second.

He breathed easier on learning that Caradoc and Flinders no longer required his presence. It suggested that Angela was taking the entire weight, and a damned good job too. Sergeant Grant might give him grief, but LePage felt that he could handle that.

A quarter of an hour afterwards, Sergeant Grant, nerve-tweakingly deliberate, was saying, "Let's make sure I got this straight, Lippy. You had no part in letting Huxtable or whatever his name is—this famous drunk of yours—you had no part in letting him go?"

"On my life, Sarge! Me, I thought he was drunk enough to detain. But it was a judgement call, right? I mean, we've been told if a drunk is no danger to himself or others, not a nuisance, then use your discretion. I was all for taking him in, but Ange, she always knows better. 'Course, he was a Hooray Henry, one of her sort, that might have counted. Give him a break, she goes, and we don't need the hassle. Fair play, I let myself get nagged into it."

"Very well, I get the message. It was all done on her initiative." Grant sucked a back tooth. "Though you're the one with experience, senior partner, like. Showing her the ropes."

"Sarge, she kept on at me. You know how it is. Ange gets nasty if she can't have her own way. Sulks and threatens and throws tantrums for hours. If I've got a fault, it's chivalry, see. I let myself be swayed because she's a woman. Can't deny it, that's me. And it seemed trivial, too, just another drunk."

Grant, balding, grizzled, and pouchy as he was, had the aura of an oversized schoolboy as he chewed his lower lip, frowning. His podgy hand hovered over the drawer where disciplinary report forms were kept. That as much as spite spurred Kit LePage to share his theory.

"Sarge, this is awkward, but I couldn't sleep, keeping it to myself. Might be wrong, mind, it was only an impression. But I reckon PC Farrington knew that punter. Had a good notion who he was, anyway. I've been thinking, see. She kept out of his way all the while, and usually she's got her nose stuck well in.

"But after she talked me into letting him go and he had it away on his toes . . . when Inspector Caradoc and Flinders and them

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steamed up, *she wasn't surprised.* Not gobsmacked, leastways. Even before we knew Huxtable was a wrong 'un, she bet me he wasn't in the mini-cab office. Like she'd expected him to do a runner, all along."

"Don't worry your pretty little head about that, Lippy. It's all being attended to by them upstairs."

"Then she did know! She's in trouble. Shame."

Sergeant Grant said, "You make a right ricket, buying that chap's line, then you try to drop your partner in the mire over it. What a prince you are. Yes, PC Farrington knew more than she let on. Between you and me and the gatepost, she's written her ticket to CID, sooner rather than later."

He was relentless. "If you'd been a decent bloke, I expect young Ange would have shared the credit. As it is, you've just gone to no end of trouble convincing me that all the headwork and initiative was down to her—and you never had an inkling of what was going on. I shan't even bother telling CID that, because they have worked it out already. It's the organ grinder what gets promotion, old son, not the monkey."

With sincerity born of chagrin, PC LePage muttered, "It's not fair. If they hadn't started messing around with the drink laws, altered closing time, any fool could have seen he wasn't a genuine drunk."

LePage meant that pub licensing hours had been liberalised recently, not quite a century after pubs were ordered (as a strictly temporary, emergency measure) to eject all customers and lock their doors by ten-thirty P.M. That was during World War I; no freedom-loving country is more tolerant of petty and needless repression by its own elected servants than Britain.

These days many pubs and clubs do stay open much later, so the wretched LePage had a point. Even he might have found something odd about a drunk still staggering around three hours after the old curfew for boozers.

"So now it's Parliament's fault," Sergeant Grant sighed. But then he chuckled, for he was a lay-preacher and churchwarden, and a thought had tickled him.

"There's a passage in the Bible that fits your situation to a T, Lippy. 'Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging.' Once this tale gets round the nick—and I don't approve of gossip, but this once I shall make it my business to spread the story—then you'll be getting plenty of that. Mockery, not wine." ●

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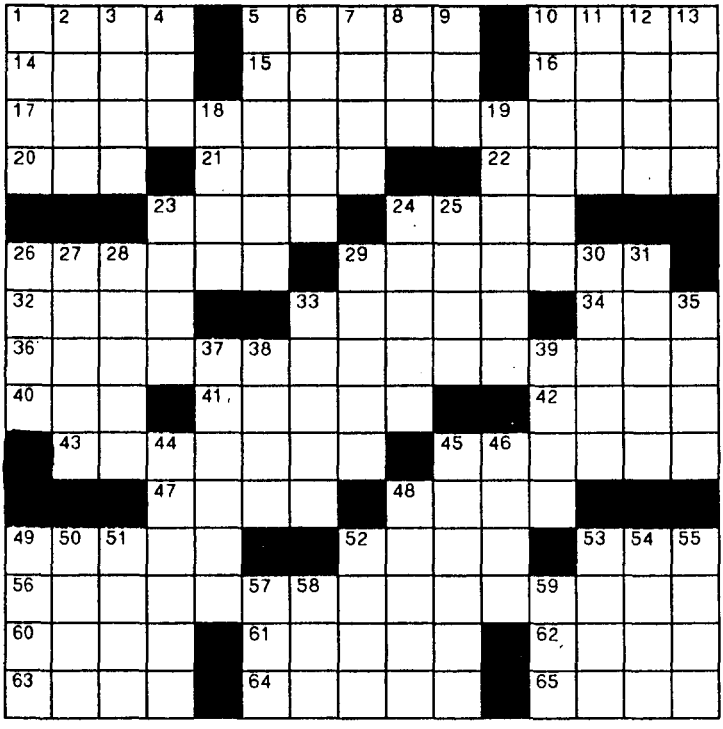
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 228

ACROSS

1 Periods
5 Actress Barkin
10 *Was it* —— *I Saw?* Perry
14 Negri's colleague
15 Charter
16 John J. Malone's creator Craig ——
17 A.K.A. Edmund Crispin
20 Follows Fri.
21 Kind of deal
22 Penalties
23 French laughter
24 —— *Will Freeze,* Margaret Millar
26 Greeting
29 *Cell divisions*
32 Latin I verb
33 Opera singer
34 Dannay's partner
36 A.K.A. Peter Collinson
40 Before to Blake
41 Like a school board

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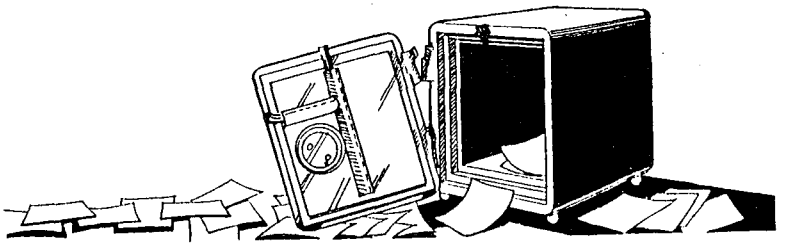
42 A son of Judah
43 —— *of the Storm,* film starring Gish sisters
45 Musical form
47 Novelist Ayn
48 *Games to Keep the —— Away,* Marcia Muller
49 Bobbin
52 Concluding passage, mus.
53 Monogram familiar to Wimsey's fans
56 A.K.A. Amanda Cross
60 Hebrew letter
61 Degrade
62 Marathon, e.g.
63 Nero to Archie
64 Needs
65 Mme. Maigret's friend

DOWN

1 Declines
2 —— Avis
3 In ——, bogged down
4 Algonquian Indian
5 *Rum Punch,* by —— Leonard
6 Sierra ——
7 Detective Drury
8 Superlative suffix
9 Pos.' opposite
10 A great number
11 Nothing in Nantes
12 Land measure
13 Josephine's family
18 Revise
19 Lots ——, spacious
23 Ms. Rendell
24 Like some stories
25 —— girl!
26 Infamous Marquis
27 Bitter in Bologna
28 Kind of beam
29 Soda fountain orders
30 *For the Sake of ——,* Elizabeth George
31 Attack
33 Mild
35 Lab vessel
37 "—— return," McArthur at Corregidor
38 Dash
39 Anne Perry's Inspector
44 Trial impressions
45 Ms. Hawkins' namesakes
46 Spoken
48 Biblical verb
49 Plant disease
50 —— Alto
51 Unwrought metals
52 Biggers' sleuth
53 *A —— of Poison,* Charlotte Armstrong
54 One of Johnson's daughters
55 Dagger
57 Steer wild, naut.
58 Sports org.
59 Part of a bikini



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Ed Gorman has become one of the mystery field's most mysterious men. Named Ghost of Honor at the 1992 Southwest Mystery Convention, Mr. Gorman is seldom present at mystery functions except in spirit. His fiction, however, is anything but ghostly, as you'll see in this vivid little tale . . :

HUNK

by ED GORMAN

I suppose it's vain of me but I always time myself. Sort of like running a stopwatch at a sporting event.

Tonight I was off my time. The first twenty minutes, I couldn't really get the young woman to focus on me. She was meeting a female friend at this bar and the friend was late and Laura—the young woman—kept anxiously watching the door.

"I'm sure she'll be along," I said.

She looked at me and smiled. "God," she said, "I wish I didn't have to worry about her because I sure would like to concentrate on you." She giggled. "You're gorgeous."

I've never known how to respond to that particular compliment. If I say yes, I am gorgeous, and thank you very much for pointing that out, then I'm an egotist. If I say no, I'm not gorgeous, then I sound phony and only begging for more compliments—because the truth is, I am in fact gorgeous. Pure genetic luck. Gorgeous.

Fortunately, I was saved from either response by a waitress who came over to tell Laura that she had a phone call.

While I waited for her to come back, I ordered us another round—scotch on the rocks for me, a Lite beer for her, though she was quite slim and quite pretty—and looked around.

It was nine o'clock and in singles bars along the Strip, the rainy Wednesday night was just starting to roll. The first exultant beat of the disco music summoning dancers to the floor. The first roaring snort of coke shared in both the men's and women's bathrooms. The first inkling in the minds of otherwise faithful wives out with girlfriends that maybe . . . just maybe . . . well, who can be faithful

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forever, right? And over it all a kind of despair . . . everybody knowing that soon enough their looks will be gone and the dance floor given over to younger and prettier people . . . and that life will be measured out in paychecks and annual health checkups and the ever-increasing number of funerals one attends as one gets older. But if the music is loud enough . . . if the drugs are spellbinding enough . . . if the sex is hard and fast and explosive enough . . . well then all these terrible intimations of age and grief can be pushed back . . . held at bay for one more boozy night.

"She has a cold."

"Your friend."

"Umm-hmm," Laura said, sitting down again.

"So she's not coming?"

"Right."

"I'll be insincere and say too bad."

She giggled. She sounded like a ten-year-old girl, all high clean innocent laughter. I loved it. "Well, she kept trying to be noble and say that she hated to see me stuck here so maybe she'd come down after all but—Well, I said I'd struggle through somehow."

She reached across the table and touched my hand. "God, you really are gorgeous. I just can't believe you're a chauffeur."

"Well, it's true."

"You're the one who should be being 'chauffed' around. Or is that a word?"

"It is now."

"Do you like it?"

" 'Chauffed'?"

"No, you know what I mean. Being—well, like a servant."

"Oh, he's very nice and very democratic about things." I indicated my corporate gray suit. "This is what I wear to work."

"Not that—what do you call it—uniform?"

"Livery."

"Oh. Right. Livery."

I smiled. "I don't even have to wear that dorky little hat. In fact—" I checked my digital wrist watch. Four thousand dollars worth of digital wrist watch. Mr. Trueblood is really generous indeed. "In fact, I'm at work now."

"Now? Right now?"

"Yes. Mr. Trueblood is down the street at a shop. He said he'd need half an hour and that I should feel free to pop in here and have a drink."

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"Oh shoot."

"What?"

"Then you'll be leaving right away, won't you?"

"For tonight. But there'll be other nights."

She looked at me again. The way they all look at me, especially after they've had one or two drinks over their usual limit. "God, I'll bet you're a heartbreaker." She'd been drinking for two hours.

I shrugged. "That's the assumption everybody makes. But I've had my heart broken a few times—once, quite badly."

Her hand found mine again. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been flip."

I made a big thing of changing the subject, of implying that my heart had been broken far worse than I'd let on. "How would you like to see the limousine?"

"Right now?"

"Sure? Why not. Mr. Trueblood probably won't be back for another ten minutes or so."

"You won't get in trouble?"

"No. I told you. He's very understanding."

"God, he really sounds like it."

"C'mon, then."

I left money for both the bill and a fair but not memorable tip.

A minute later we walked through the light blue neon rain to the long black stretch limousine in the far shadows of the bar's parking lot. Raindrops clung to her dark hair and made it sparkle.

"Wow," she said. "It's gorgeous."

As we walked, I checked my watch again. My best time was a year ago in Las Vegas. Found a lounge, went inside, found a likely candidate, and had her in the limo in less than twelve minutes. I'm not one of those perpetual adolescents who constantly boasts about his skill with women—but twelve minutes is pretty damned good time.

She walked around the limo as if she were a customer on a car lot. I half-expected her to kick a tire and ask me what kind of mileage it got.

"This is the biggest limo I've ever seen," she said. She was a little wobbly from her drinks.

I opened the front door on the passenger side. "Here's the front."

She peeked in. "Wow. What're all those gadgets?"

She had a wonderful backside, made even more wonderful by the way she was leaning over to peer into the car.

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"Mostly automatic features for getting in and out of the estate. Mr. Trueblood really likes his privacy."

"Hey," she said, looking back at the glass separating front from back. "Everything is—what do you call it—opaque. You can't see anything at all."

She stood up, extricated herself from the front seat. Grinned. "He really must like his privacy. Does he have—intimate moments back there or something?"

I grinned back. "I'm not sure. The truth is, whatever he does, he keeps to himself. I've never even seen the back."

"Oh bull."

"No. True."

"Don't you have a key?"

I smiled my best boyish smile. "Oh, I have a key all right. But I'm just afraid that about the time I open the back door and look inside—Well, that's when Mr. Trueblood will show up. And when I was interviewing for this job, that's one of the first things he told me. That I was never to open the back doors and look inside. Strictly off-limits."

"Well, aren't you curious?"

I laughed. "Aren't I curious? Of course I am. Very curious."

She glanced around the parking lot. "Well, what's wrong with right now?"

"Oh no," I said. "Absolutely not."

"C'mon. Now you've got me curious."

"I couldn't. I really couldn't."

Another quick glance around the lot. "I'll tell you what."

"What?" I said.

"You open the door and peek inside—and I'll keep watch for you. Then you keep watch and I'll look back there. All right?"

"Well—"

"C'mon, it'll be fun."

And she stood on her tiptoes and gave me a cute little kiss on the corner of my mouth.

"Well—" I said.

"C'mon, hurry up. What's he wearing?"

"Who?"

"Mr. Trueblood, of course."

"Oh, a buff blue suit and a dark hat."

"I hate hats on men."

"Well, he's got one on."

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"All right. Buff blue suit and dark hat. I'll go up near the sidewalk and watch for him. Which direction will he be coming from?"

"East."

She giggled. "I never was a girl scout. Which way is east?"

"Left."

"All right. Buff blue suit. Dark hat. Coming from the east. I'll go watch for him. You get the back door open now and look inside."

"Right."

She hurried to the front of the parking lot.

I got the back door opened and looked inside.

Two minutes later, I went up to the sidewalk and said, "God, it's incredible." The night smelled of rain and cigarette smoke from the bar. Cars hissed by in the neon night.

"The backseat? It's really incredible?"

"Right. It has everything."

"Like a bar and stuff?"

"A bar is just the beginning. It's even got a—" I gave her my best devilish grin. "Well, go find out for yourself."

I handed her the key.

"Better hurry up," I said.

"God, this is great," she said, taking the keys and turning back to the limo.

Ten minutes later, I steered the limo out of the parking lot and onto the street.

A few minutes earlier, there'd been a scream back there so I knew that Mr. Trueblood hadn't used the chloroform on her yet. But he never waited long. And, in fact, I hadn't heard a peep from back there since except for the very occasional growl.

Mr. Trueblood always growls when he really gets going. The more growls the messier the backseat will be in the morning when it's time for me to clean everything up.

But he never completely destroys them because he wants to leave a little something for me.

I drove on into the night and decided to turn up the radio just a tad so I didn't have to hear the growling.

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Historical detective stories, once relatively rare, are now one of the field's most prolific sub-categories. Fans of mysteries set in other times should not be without *The Mammoth Book of Historical Whodunnits* (Carroll & Graf, $9.95), a generous anthology of over 500 pages edited by Mike Ashley with a foreword by Ellis Peters.

In Ashley's introduction, he counters a belief, allegedly held by many, that Peters originated the historical detective story. This is something of a straw man discussion, since knowledgeable buffs are surely aware of the earlier contributions, often originating or reprinted in the pages of this magazine, of such authors as Melville Davisson Post, Lillian de la Torre, John Dickson Carr, Robert van Gulik, Theodore Mathieson, and Peter Lovesey, all of whom antedated the debut of Brother Cadfael in 1977.

Ashley also takes on the definition of historical fiction. Does it refer to a story taking place in any past time, or must it be set in a time other than the author's own? I like the former, broader definition. I have trouble buying the idea that if Max Allan Collins, born 1948, writes a novel set in thirties Chicago, it's a historical, but if Howard Browne, born 1908, does the same, it's not. Ashley prefers the narrower definition and limits his consideration almost entirely to fiction set before the twentieth century.

Most of Ashley's selections are reprints, including such familiar tales as Carr's classic "The Gentleman from Paris," Post's "The Doomdorf Mystery," and Joe Gores's Elizabethan "A Sad and Bloody Hour," along with representative cases of de la Torre's Dr. Sam Johnson, S.S. Rafferty's Captain Cork, and van Gulik's Judge Dee. Following the current trend, one full-length novel is included, Raymond Butler's *Captain Nash and the Wroth Inheritance* (1975), about a private detective of 1771.

There are also several originals. John Maddox Roberts's ancient Roman Decius Metellus is in good form in "Mightier than the Sword," while Paul Harding (P.C. Doherty) presents a remarkably vivid description of a medieval joust-turned-murder in "The Confession of Brother Athelstan."

Ashley includes a valuable bibliography of historical detection, but among the Romans, he leaves out the best of the lot: Steven Saylor's Gordianus the Finder. The first Gordianus short story, the Robert L. Fish Award-winning "A Will is a Way," is one of the fourteen selections in Edward D. Hoch's *The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories 1993* (Walker, $21.95). Another entry is one of the best cases for a historical detective who also

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frequents the pages of *EQMM:* editor Hoch's Dr. Sam Hawthorne in "The Problem of the Leather Man," set in 1937.

Below are considered the latest book-length case for Gordianus, along with other recent examples of the historical mystery.

**** Steven Saylor: *Catilina's Riddle,* St. Martin's, $21.95. The third book-length case for Gordianus the Finder is a gem, combining a classical pure detective plot with reconstruction of real historical events. Though now pursuing the life of a gentleman farmer, Gordianus again becomes involved in Roman affairs when he is asked to play host to Catilina, political rival to his old friend Cicero. Is the headless corpse found in his well connected to the political jockeying? The relationship of Gordianus with his adopted son Meto is especially well done, and Saylor presents the historical record on Catilina, usually cast as a villain by contemporary sources, with even-handedness. The solution of the whodunit puzzle is a textbook example of the Least Suspected Person. (Since I've been so damning of overlong mysteries, I should emphasize this is one novel of over four hundred pages that carries its length well.)

**** Joseph Hansen: *Living Upstairs,* Dutton, $20. This novel of the gay community in World War II Los Angeles tests the definition of historical fiction since the author was himself a bookshop employee and aspiring novelist in that era, as is his nineteen-year-old protagonist. Nathan Reed is worried about lover Hoyt Stubblefield's seeming involvement in radical politics. This is not a "real people" historical, as most of the characters are fictitious, but movie comic Grady Sutton plays an offstage role; Communist leader Gus Hall delivers the eulogy of a possible murder victim; and William Saroyan has a bit part. There's enough of a whodunit angle, complete with surprise twist, to justify recommending this to Hansen's mystery fans, but essentially it belongs with his mainstream novels. However you pigeonhole it, it's a fine book, rich in vivid characters and observations on life and love, with a superb evocation of time and place.

*** June Thomson: *The Secret Files of Sherlock Holmes,* Penzler, $20. Thomson's pastiches are among the best ever written, remarkably capturing the prose and plotting style of the Conan Doyle originals. They eschew celebrity guest appearances and other stunts and gimmicks, presenting straightforward Watsonian accounts of the vanishing James Phillimore, the amateur mendicants, the remarkable worm, the notorious canary trainer (quite different from Meyer's in the book reviewed below), and three other of the untold cases, along with the requisite trumped up story of how the tales came to light and speculations on their authenticity. The shade of Vincent Starrett must be smiling.

** Nicholas Meyer: *The Canary Trainer,* Norton, $19.95. With his

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1974 bestseller *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution,* Meyer began the unending string of book-length Sherlock Holmes pastiches, most of them with real historical personages and/or contemporary fictional characters from other authors' works in the cast. Returning to the field for the first time since *The West End Horror* (1976), Meyer begins well with a tongue-in-cheek scholarly foreword and an opening chapter that suggest just how good he can be at the game. And certainly, the use of one of Watson's untold-case tags ("the notorious canary-trainer") to refer to Gaston Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera* and his tutelage of Christine Daaé, is an inspired idea. But when the account proves a virtual rewrite of the Leroux story, with little detection by Holmes and few twists to surprise the reader, the end result is disappointing. The setting is 1880s Paris, and Holmes himself narrates most of the story.

** Tony Hays: *Murder in the Latin Quarter,* Iris Press, P.O. Box 486, Belt Buckle, TN 37020; $10.95. In the Paris of 1922, a dead body is found in Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company bookstore, and James Joyce, author of the controversial *Ulysses,* is the main suspect. Among the other expatriates in the cast are Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Thornton Wilder. Ernest Hemingway, serving as Watson to narrator and detective Jack Barnett, sometimes seems dumber than Captain Hastings. Hays has done a good job of research and provides some interesting touches, but there are problems, including some terrible verbal anachronisms. Most jarring is Barnett's statement on the third page of the story that Sylvia was "into books" while he was "into forgetting." Later miscues—"no way," "no problem," "goofed"—pale by comparison.

Undoubtedly many readers will classify *The Diary of Jack the Ripper* (Hyperion, $21.95), eighty-six pages of facsimile and transcript with the balance of the book a narrative account by Shirley Harrison, with the historical fiction. The originally scheduled American publisher, Warner, dropped the book pre-publication when convinced by documents expert Kenneth W. Rendell the found manuscript was a hoax. Making no claims for the discovery's authenticity, Hyperion includes Rendell's persuasive report, followed by a rebuttal (also persuasive) by Robert Smith of the British publisher, Smith Gryphon. Whether the diary is really Jack's or not, the narrative of its discovery is fascinating, and the idea of linking two classic crimes was an inspired one, even if it is a hoax. For the purported author of the diary was James Maybrick, who died in 1889, allegedly the victim of his wife Florence in one of the most notorious Victorian poisoning cases.

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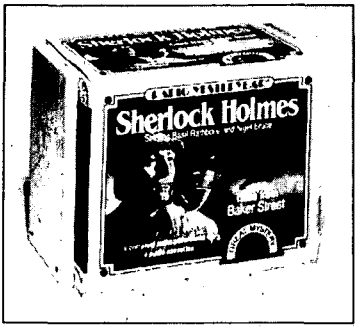

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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

When he is not busy at his typewriter, one of Donald Olson's hobbies is restoring antique furniture. Objects of special beauty, often antique, frequently appear in his stories; here it is a lovely French umbrella, one that its owner says is simply "one of a kind" . . .

THE FRENCH UMBRELLA

by DONALD OLSON

Despite the rain, Fay would rather have walked from her parents' East Sixties apartment to her own far more modest flat west of Broadway, but had yielded to her father's plea that she take a taxi. His somewhat exaggerated concern for her safety dated from an incident twelve years before, when Fay was nine.

It was her custom to visit her parents for a few hours every Tuesday, her day off from the shop called Rainchecks, a boutique off Fifth Avenue featuring imported rainwear and accessories, a job she enjoyed far more than the two years at an expensive boarding school which she had left after suffering a mild breakdown. Her father was not happy to have Fay move out of the family duplex, but approved of his daughter's roommate, a strong-principled, motherly sort of girl named Prudence Baxter.

It was on this particular rainy afternoon that something extraordinary happened. Fay sat gazing out of the cab window as they were held up in traffic near Forty-eighth Street when her glance fell upon a woman looking in a store window. It was not, however, the woman herself who first caught Fay's attention; it was the umbrella the woman held, peacock blue with a distinctive carved ivory handle.

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"I'll get out here," cried Fay, already opening the door. She paid the driver and splashed her way to the curb, knowing she must be mistaken of course; it couldn't possibly be the same umbrella, although Claudine had insisted hers was one of a kind. "Not another like it in Paris, ma petite," she'd boasted, twirling its ivory handle encircled by a narrow silver band engraved with Claudine's initials.

A feverish excitement gripped Fay as she followed the woman along the street, eager and yet curiously reluctant to catch a glimpse of her face. Oh God, she thought, what if it *is* Claudine? What would I do? No, no, it was impossible, it couldn't be. Claudine still in New York? Quite unlikely.

A block farther along the woman paused at the entrance to a restaurant, collapsing the umbrella, shaking the rain from it before opening the door. Still, Fay caught only a glimpse of pale sleek hair bound in a chignon before the woman vanished inside. Fay hesitated briefly before entering the restaurant, where she paused, heart thumping, scanning the rows of tables in the fashionably twilit atmosphere.

As the woman sat down at a table near the window Fay saw her face for the first time. In the harsh light of day the changes wrought by twelve years might have been noticeable, but in that dim light the face appeared unmarked by time, the same high cheekbones, the slightly-too-long nose, the whimsical arch of the brows. There could be no doubt. It *was* Claudine Bouchère.

Fay's first impulse was to retreat, yet a kind of horrified fascination rooted her to the spot; it still seemed utterly improbable that it could be Claudine sitting there in that pose of relaxed, elegant negligence, now sipping the glass of white wine a waiter had set before her. Dismay, confusion, and then a rising flood of anger dispelled Fay's air of indecision; before giving a thought to the consequences of her action, she found herself boldly approaching the table.

"Hello, Claudine."

The woman looked at her blankly, without a hint of recognition. "Pardon?"

"Don't you remember me? I'm Fay."

A wrinkle of the brows, then a sudden narrowing of those sea-green eyes. *"Fay?* No, no, it cannot *be."*

Neither alarm nor confusion, merely astonishment.

Fay laughed nervously, her voice tight. "Funny. That's just what I thought when I saw you. It cannot be."

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"But how *divine*. Ma petite Fay, all grown up. How wonderful to see you."

"Is it really?"

"But of course. Oh, don't stand there. Sit down. I'm meeting someone but we have awhile. I'm a bit early."

Fay sat down, aware that she was trembling. "*You* haven't changed, Claudine. And still carrying the same umbrella. That's how I spotted you in the street."

Claudine uttered her throaty Marlene Dietrich laugh. "Ah, oui, my French umbrella. You remembered. How you loved to carry it. It has sheltered me from many a storm since those days."

The woman's aplomb was unbelievable. Or was it an act? Her guileless, politely amused expression betrayed no shadow of anxiety or even of guarded speculation.

"I wasn't sure what to do," said Fay. "To face you like this—well, I had to, of course, I had to make sure—or to do the sensible thing."

"The sensible thing?"

Fay was suddenly, secretly furious at such apparent insouciance. "Well, my first impulse," she lied, "was to look for the nearest policeman."

That should have shaken her, but no, not so much as the flicker of an eye, the quiver of a lip. "A policeman! Oh, my dear little Fay, that would have been a great foolishness."

"Foolish?"

"Under the circumstances, the height of folly, I assure you." Then, her gaze distracted, she added quickly: "Ah, my friend is here. I'm sorry, my dear, I can say no more now." Her hand reached out, closed tightly around Fay's. "You must promise me. Say nothing about this—reunion—to anyone. Not anyone, understand? Do nothing until we have talked." She reached in her bag, scrawled on a card. "My address and unlisted phone number. Come and see me tomorrow at three, promise? It is urgent that we talk."

Fay glanced up at the tall, darkly handsome man who had arrived at the table. She rose, somewhat clumsily. Claudine stood too, reached again for Fay's hand. "Promise?"

"Yes, very well. Goodbye for now." She turned and fled from the restaurant, the card clutched in her hand. The rain had stopped but the air still had that bluish cast, like the atmosphere in a scarily unpleasant dream.

* * *

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"Pru, it's the truth. I ran into her, just like that. I couldn't believe it."

"And you talked to her? Actually talked to her?" Prudence was a short, plump girl a few years older than Fay, with an open expression and an air of constant, mother-hennish solicitude.

"For a few minutes, until this man arrived."

"What did you say? What did *she* say?"

"Nothing, really. It was incredible, she was as cool as a—what's cucumber in French?"

"Concombre." Prudence worked as a translator at the UN.

"She made me promise not to mention our meeting to anyone till we'd had a chance to talk. I don't know what to do. I mean, I know what I ought to do, but I did promise. I don't know why. I wanted time to think."

"Think? Good God, what's there to think about? All you've done is given her time to fly the coop."

Fay pondered this. "I don't think so. She could have been acting, of course, but I'd swear she wasn't the least bit alarmed. More amused than anything. Almost indifferent."

"Poor Fay, you're such a child. At least call your father."

"Not yet. I don't want to upset him. I don't think Daddy's ever quite got over what happened. He even insisted on buying a gun afterward so Mother and I would be safe in the house when he was away. Maybe I should do nothing. What does it really matter after all this time?"

Prudence rolled her eyes. "I think Dr. Sonnenberg would disagree. You said yourself he believes all your problems stem from what happened back then. And why should that beastly woman go unpunished?"

With seeming irrelevance, Fay mentioned the French umbrella. "Whenever I've thought about Claudine I've remembered it. It's like seeing in my mind a picture by Renoir. Claudine holding my hand, the two of us strolling along the seashore under that blazing summer sun, shielded by the French umbrella. I was so happy, Pru. Maybe that's why I can't feel terribly vindictive about Claudine, no matter what she did. I'd been so wretched having to listen to those endless rows between Mother and Daddy, feeling somehow my whole world was coming to an end. I'll never forget how I felt the day Mother told me Daddy was leaving us. Deserting us. We'd be leaving the house in Larchmont, everything would be different. I remember how I prayed that something would happen to make everything all right

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again. And sure enough, something did happen. It was as if my prayers were answered."

Daddy was going away to "sort things out." He'd tried to explain to nine-year-old Fay. She remembered the phrase "trial separation." She was inconsolable, and Mother was of little help, being either hysterical or in a state of brooding numb despair. The only comfort was provided by Claudine, who'd been part of the household for about a year since arriving from Paris, a sort of combination nanny and au pair. Fay had taken to her immediately, for she had the gift of sharing a child's world without that telltale air of condescension and falseness.

Claudine had a boyfriend named Kevin Corkery who did odd jobs and gardening and occasionally chauffeured for Fay's father. Fay developed a childish crush on Corkery, who was quite good-looking and loved to tease her.

A week after Daddy left, Mother went to spend a few days with Fay's widowed grandmother on Sixty-eighth Street, leaving Claudine in charge of the house. A few days after this, Claudine surprised and delighted Fay by telling her they too were going away, a holiday by the seaside. It was summer, school was out, and a friend of Kevin's had loaned him the use of a cottage on Long Island.

"I've called your mama and she agrees it's a splendid idea," said Claudine. "We'll go swimming every day and have weenie roasts on the beach. There's even a boat. Won't that be fun?"

And it was. It was bliss. Fay had never been to the shore and after the domestic turmoil at home, it was like being whisked into a magical world of peace and light and harmony. The cottage was a somewhat ramshackle affair and quite remote, which made it all an even more delightful adventure, like something out of Robinson Crusoe. There was no TV, no telephone; it was almost like camping out. Fay had never been happier. She and Claudine never strayed far from the cottage, although Kevin often had to be away taking care of his odd-job customers and shopping for what supplies they needed.

"I wish we could stay here forever and ever," Fay told Claudine as they sat on the beach at night looking up at the stars.

"And never see your mama again? How cruel!"

"*She* wouldn't care. She doesn't love me."

"Ah, now that *is* unfair. She loves you even more than you can comprehend, ma petite. She would do anything for you."

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"Well, what about Daddy? *He* doesn't love me or he wouldn't have gone away."

"Not true. He does love you, and he loves your mama. Maybe right now he doesn't know how much he loves her, but *I* know. I am a French girl. I know about such things. You must have patience, little Fay. All will be fine, you wait and see."

Fay lost track of time. The summer days passed like a long slow ride on a shining carousel, the outside world never intruding upon their happy solitude. But as the days drifted by Kevin's absences grew lengthier and more frequent; at these times Fay was aware that Claudine's happiness seemed clouded by some obscure concern she did not share with Fay.

Finally one night the spell of fine weather came to an end. A violent thunderstorm woke Fay, passing as quickly as it arrived but leaving Fay sleepless on her cot. Presently she became aware of voices murmuring in the next room where Claudine and Kevin slept. She rose quietly and moved to the door, pressing her ear to it and listening.

It was not like the turbulent rows between Mother and Daddy, yet Fay detected a similar tone of antagonism.

She heard Kevin say: "I won't take the risk, that's all there is to it."

To which Claudine replied: "No, you will not take the risk but you will take the money, oui?"

"Only my share."

"Shares. When did we ever speak of shares? It was all for *us.*"

"Crazy, that's what it was. We should never have done it."

"*Now* you say that."

"Yes, well, you've been holed up out here. You've no idea what a stink it's raised."

"What did you expect? Oh, do what you wish. Go! Leave us. I'll take care of things here."

In the morning, with the sun as bright as ever, Claudine set about cleaning the cottage in a mood of hectic gaiety; neither then nor later as they ate their picnic lunch on the beach did she once mention Kevin's name. With a child's instinctive wisdom Fay too avoided the subject.

Back in the cottage Claudine said, "You'll be all right if I leave you for a little while, won't you, ma petite?"

"Where are you going?"

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"To the village. It's much too long a walk for you. I won't be gone long. I must buy something at the drugstore. Kevin will not be coming back."

Fay no longer felt any constraint to remain silent. "I woke up last night. I heard you talking. He said he was going away. Like Daddy went away?"

"Something like that, yes. Men, they are all alike. They get restless. Quel dommage. You'll be all right, but do not leave the cottage. Promise?"

"Promise."

Fay felt no sense of unease until after two hours Claudine had still not returned. But she was not frightened. She loved and trusted Claudine. The tears did not come until the pine trees behind the cottage began casting long shadows across the sand dunes.

She decided then to go and look for Claudine and was just leaving the cottage when three men came down the narrow track through the pines. Two were policemen. The third was Daddy.

"I still can't hate her," said Fay. "How could I? No matter what Mother and Daddy said about her. How she and Kevin had betrayed their trust, kidnapped me for money, might even have murdered me and buried me out there on that desolate beach. It didn't change the fact that those had been the happiest two weeks of my young life. And Claudine *had* phoned the police before she disappeared and told them where to find me."

Prudence considered this with a frown of mature scepticism. "Maybe the real reason you couldn't hate Claudine was that if you hadn't been kidnapped and given your folks such a jolt, they wouldn't have reconciled. Ever think of that?"

Fay nodded. "Shock therapy for a shaky marriage? It certainly did the trick. I think Daddy blamed himself for what happened. He couldn't have been sweeter to Mother and me after that."

"Fine, but that doesn't change the fact they *did* kidnap you and extort all that money from your parents. You can't simply overlook it."

"No, I suppose not. I suppose it's my duty to put the police onto Claudine. I have to think about it."

When she left for work the next morning, Fay did not tell Prudence she was going to keep her appointment with Claudine that after-

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noon, just in case her friend was proved right and Claudine had already skipped.

But she had not. A smiling Claudine opened the door of the fourth-floor apartment of the brownstone not many blocks from where Fay lived.

"I knew you would come," she said.

Fay looked around the small but well-furnished living room. "How nice. Still living on the ransom money after all this time?" she inquired with conscious cruelty.

"Hardly. We weren't *that* greedy. But I had a friend who gave me good financial advice."

"Kevin?"

Claudine laughed. "Oh, my dear, God knows whatever happened to Kevin. I don't."

"You've lived here all this time?"

"No. I lived abroad until about a year ago."

Fay said sharply, "You mean until you thought it safe to come back?"

"It was always *safe.*"

"Oh?"

Claudine, with a sigh of reluctance, adopted a more serious manner. "Since yesterday I've been debating whether or not to tell you the truth. I decided I had no choice. I like my life. I see no reason to endanger it merely to spare your feelings."

"Sorry, I don't follow you."

"Twelve years ago, remember? When your papa left your mama, possibly forever. You remember how distraught she was. Even panic-stricken. The thought of losing him devastated her. Your mama confided in me perhaps more than you realized at the time. She was desperate. Willing to try anything to get him back. The kidnapping, you see, was her idea. If *that* didn't bring him back, nothing would, or so she reasoned. We made a pact, she and Kevin and I. Well, you know the rest. Bizarre a plot as it seemed, it worked, didn't it?"

Even after the first shock wave of this appalling revelation had passed, disbelief did not enter Fay's mind, almost as if in one of its deeper recesses there had always remained some tiny formless atom of uncertainty.

"But it was monstrous!" she cried. "What you did to *him.* To Daddy."

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"Yes, well, your mama could hardly tell him, could she. And I would sincerely hope you never do."

Fay rose so abruptly her knee struck the coffee table. "No, I'll not tell Daddy, but I shall never talk to *her* again."

"Fay, you may as well know. I contacted your mama shortly after I came back to New York. We had a cozy little visit. Right here."

Fay stared at her. "But *why?"*

Claudine shrugged. "My investments have not been all that successful. I thought she might lend a hand. Which she did. A very generous woman, your mama—when she has no choice."

Fay walked until she was exhausted, then wandered into a movie, sitting through it twice without really seeing it, wanting only to huddle in the darkness with her own disturbing thoughts. When she came out it was raining again. Unwilling to face anyone, even Prudence, she had a meal in a restaurant before going home.

"Where the dickens have you been?" Prudence greeted her. "Your father's called twice. Fay, I don't care what you think, I was worried. I told him, about yesterday. I told him you'd seen that woman."

White-faced, Fay lashed out at her. "You fool! You meddling *fool.* You don't know what you've done."

"Fay, listen to me—"

"You didn't give him her address, did you?"

"You didn't *tell* me her address."

"He mustn't find her. He mustn't let the police know. The things she would say. It would kill him."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Never mind. I've got to go out again."

"Fay!"

But she was already out the door.

Fay's sole thought was that she must warn Claudine, urge her to get away while she still had time. Her mind was haunted by dread of the frightful consequences should the police—or her father—find Claudine and learn the truth. At a phone booth she dialed the number on the card Claudine had given her. The phone rang and rang and rang but there was no answer.

She could think of no other course of action but to talk to her father, tell him something, anything, anything but the truth, somehow persuade him to do nothing.

* * *

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"For pity's sake, Fay, why didn't you tell me you'd seen Claudine Bouchère? At least Prudence had the sense to confide in me."

"Daddy, I didn't want to upset you and Mother. Not till I'd had a chance to talk to Claudine."

"But why *should* you have talked to her?"

"I don't know. I can't explain. Did you tell Mother I'd seen her?"

"Of course. You can imagine how it affected her."

Fay seized upon this. "That's why I had to see you, Daddy. Don't you see what it'll do to Mother if that business is dragged up again? We must forget I ever saw Claudine."

He regarded her bleakly. "Too late for that, I'm afraid."

"But it *isn't.*"

"Fay, I kept putting it off. Calling the police, I mean. I wanted to talk to you first and get her address. But I couldn't reach you. Finally I did call them about fifteen minutes ago. When I gave them her name they told me. Some friend of Claudine's had a date to pick her up. When he got to her apartment, he found her dead. She'd been shot."

Fay dropped heavily into the nearest chair. "My God. When did it happen?"

"Earlier this evening apparently."

"What did Mother say?"

"She doesn't know yet. She was at Judith's when I called the police." Judith was a family friend who lived on the next block. "I'm afraid this is going to upset her terribly. She's been a bundle of nerves lately. Right now she's taking a hot bath. Honey, I think we could both use a drink."

Fay noticed how his hand trembled as he poured, and suddenly, with terrible conviction, she knew.

"Daddy, how did you find her if you didn't know her address?"

"I didn't find her. That's why I kept calling you, to *get* her address."

"You didn't go out?"

"No, of course not," he said crossly.

Daddy was no fool, she knew that. Would it really be that hard for him to trace Claudine? Daddy had always had resources.

She suddenly couldn't wait to get out of his presence, said she must dash, they would talk later.

"Don't you want to see your mother?"

"No time, Daddy."

"But wait, I'll call you a cab."

"I'd rather walk, thanks. I've got my umbrella."

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"Your mother had to borrow one from Judith or she'd have been drenched."

Fay shut the door to the vestibule behind her and opened the closet to remove her coat. Only by chance did she happen to see what stood in the corner. At first she stared at it with total disbelief, then reached in and picked it up. The French umbrella. Claudine's umbrella, with its ivory handle and silver band.

Fay knew with absolute, intuitive certainty what it must mean, and could only speculate on what madness could have possessed her mother to have taken it away with her. As a concealment, perhaps, when she left Claudine's apartment?

With a spiteful joy at imagining her mother's consternation at finding the umbrella gone and knowing who must have taken it, Fay tucked it under her arm as she left the building.

I wonder, she thought, not very much caring, what she did with the gun.

DETECTIVERSE

MOTHER GOOSE NURSERY CRIMES V

Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater

by GLORIA ROSENTHAL

Peter Peter pumpkin eater
Had a wife and couldn't keep her;
He put her in a pumpkin shell,
And neighbors heard her start to yell;
They called police, voiced their objection,
And so she got an "Order of Protection."

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

Canadian M.E. Beckett began writing fiction four years ago, producing a number of stories in quick succession. Although this is his first published work, several other stories have already been sold and his career as a writer seems truly to have been launched . . .

DATING SALLY

by M. E. BECKETT

Horror is in the mind of the victim. Make the victim think that he ought to be in terror, and he is in terror. There are no intrinsically horrifying things. Only the response of the victim makes them so.

When Luther Warrant decided to make a victim, he had no idea who she would be, or how he would frighten her. That she ended as she did was because of the ways in which she perceived him and the phantoms he raised in her. And in himself.

On the third day of March, nineteen hundred and thirty-one, Luther Warrant was born. His mother turned away from him even as she presented her breast to him, and from then on, nothing in his life arrived without a second, hidden message attached to it. There was no receiving without its price. No gift that did not have its string. No love untarnished by the hook of whatever the lover wanted him to feel. From the first breath to the last, he was a manipulated thing; a creature of others, a puppet.

On the third day of March, nineteen hundred and eighty-one, Luther Warrant broke the mold. He altered forever his patterns of behavior, he thought, when he chose his first victim randomly from the telephone book, and sent her the head of a dead rabbit in the mail.

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It was not an act that heralded the unfolding of a devious plan; he had no plan at all. He just wanted, one time only, he thought, to make someone dance for him, as he had for others all of his life.

He was wrong. He never really broke the mold at all. The strings of the Luther-marionette were simply being pulled from farther away, and with increasingly jerky movements.

Sally Whitfield opened the package with a tiny thrill of delight. It wasn't a really big or exciting-looking package. But it had arrived a full ten days after her birthday, and she was imagining that she was reliving, extending the pleasure of that day by a full week-and-a-half.

Her scream at the sight of the rabbit's head was mostly reflexive. She had never had much feeling for animals, and little fear of blood, and so there was only the oddity of the rabbitless head, and the disappointment of not really having received a belated birthday present to arouse any feeling in her.

Later, she began to think about the meaning of it, and about who might have sent her such a thing, and it was then that she first felt the terror that Luther Warrant had intended her to feel. After the telephone call.

When the phone rang, she was still only mildly afraid, and she made no connection between the arrival of the grisly packet and the ringing of her telephone.

"Hello?"

"Did you enjoy your Easter rabbit?"

"Easter's not until April nineteenth. You were six weeks early," she replied, and, to Luther, her voice sounded cool, detached, almost calm. He hung up, intensely disappointed, and never again tried that experiment or any other. He had failed to master even a single moment of another human being's life, and he slipped back into the dull routine of responding to jerks at his strings and pushings of his buttons until he died, a year later, on his fifty-first birthday, of walking under a moving van.

Sally, on the other hand, was touched more and more deeply by the event, and she was the one whose life was altered forever. She and those with whom she came into contact.

Nobody had wanted to hurt her before that. Not in so brutal a way, anyway. Nobody had ever really harmed her. There had been one fellow in high school who had pushed her much further than she wanted to go in the backseat of his car, but her father and

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brother had sorted him out the next day, and that, to her, had sealed that event. She had had minor difficulties with boys for a few months afterward, but the certainty that she would and could be protected, or at least avenged, by her male relations kept others from trying the same things.

She was self-assured, articulate, intelligent, and very attractive. And then the Easter bunny came early one year, and much of that was forever altered.

Not that she became less intelligent, or less beautiful. But she did seem to become less articulate. Her self-confidence was shattered after the nightmares began. Once she had experienced them for a period of some months, she went for help.

"Doctor Lawton, I have bad nightmares, and I want them to stop." Her lip and her fingers were trembling, but Dr. Lawton was making notes, and only noticed the flatness of her tone when she spoke.

Some flattening of affect? he wrote, but later scratched that out, with a single line through the words, so that he would be able to tell that he had had and discarded that idea.

"How long have you been having them?"

"About six months."

He stopped and glanced at the page-header he had just written.

"Just after your twenty-first birthday."

"Yes."

"What do you think triggered the nightmares?"

"I got a rabbit's head in the mail."

When he looked at her in a concerned sort of way, she went on.

"It had blood on it. Somebody had cut off the head, and put it in the mail with my name on the package. I don't know who, and I don't know why."

"Maybe you don't know who, Sally, but you know a little bit about why."

She looked at him blankly.

"What was the result of the incident?" he asked.

"I have these nightmares." Her voice was a little more animated now, with the anger she felt at his emphasizing the obvious.

"And . . . so?"

"What do you mean, 'and so'? And so what?"

"What does that tell you about the intent of the sender?"

"He intended to terrify me, that's what he intended, and it's working."

"Why?"

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"How the hell do I know why?"

"No, I mean why is it working?"

"You tell me. You're the shrink."

He did not reply, but waited quietly for her to go on.

"Well, *tell* me. Tell me why?"

Still, he waited.

"You want me to say that it's because I'm making it all happen, don't you. I'm the one with the nightmares, I'm generating them, and I'm playing his game, is that it?" Now her voice was ragged. She was still angry at him, but she was also fighting tears.

"Tell me a little about the dreams themselves."

"It's the same thing every time. I'm awake, in the dream, you know?" He nodded. "And there's this guy following me. I can never see his face. I never do, but he's there, following me. Usually it's nighttime. Dark, in a deserted place, a street, I think. He follows me, and I wake up, but there's something else . . . and I forget that part."

"Every time?"

"Every time. Something about a head, something about a knife. That's all I know."

The interview went on, but the meat of it was already on the table. Sally began to be aware that she was still in charge of her own brain, and that she could allow the man (they were both sure that it was a man; in fact the question of gender never came up) to rule her nights, or she could run her own scenario.

She went to Dr. Lawton two or three times, but she didn't want his medication, and she had had what she needed of his therapy. Sally Whitfield was very intelligent and very quick.

It was soon after that that Lawton began to receive male patients with symptoms similar to hers. He always wondered, but was never sure, if it was Sally who was behind the terror these men felt. Never sure enough to go to the police. Never sure he wanted to.

Andrew Weeks was the first in line at the post-office boxes every morning. Others cursed the post office for discontinuing home delivery in new developments, but not Andrew. This was his social life.

" 'Morning, Mrs. Hendricks! How are you today?"

The rain was leaking through the rubberized hood of Mrs. Hendricks's slicker, and the mascara was dripping with it from her left eye and running down her face, making a scar appear where she had never had a wound. Her boots had been too far away, off upstairs

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in the attic, she had thought, and so she was standing in the slush in her shoes, which also leaked. Her dog had died the week before, and she had never really been a happy lady anyway.

"How the hell do I look, Andrew? That's how I feel."

Andrew inspected her closely; he was not the quickest man in the world at picking up on irony. "You look okay to me, Mrs. Hendricks," he announced happily. "Except for the runny black stuff. What is it? It's not blood, is it?"

"No Andrew, it's not blood," she answered, struggling with the key to her little lockbox, one in several hundred at the corner of the street. They all looked as if somebody had dumped them there carelessly and temporarily, but they had been there for five years.

"Well then, you look just fine." Andrew beamed.

Then Andrew screamed. He had just opened the package that somebody had sent him, and there was real blood all over his hands, coming out of the neck of the cat's head he had received.

Andrew had been an impulsive and very callow boy in high school, and had once pushed a girl too far in the back of his father's car. From today forward, he would live in fear of another such package, and he would never have the time away from his fear to push anybody anymore.

The fact that he had already changed—indeed, had never really been very evil in the first place—was of no concern to his correspondent, who had decided that, this time, tat was to be for tit.

The next experiment was of another order entirely.

Sally felt quite penitent with regard to Andrew, and made a point of dating him a couple of times, to try to get his mind off his troubles. She even slept with him once, but he spent most of the night just clinging to her, moaning slightly in his sleep. His gratitude the next morning was pathetic, and she did not repeat the treatment. He had had his chance to work out his fears as she had hers. When he had recounted the horror story to her, she had even suggested that there could have been no real blood in the package, for it would all have clotted by the time the slow postal service got the head to him. He had been grateful, but had insisted on hanging onto his terror, and Sally Whitfield was no longer patient with fools.

She pointed him in the direction of Dr. Lawton (indeed, Lawton's practice was augmented considerably by referrals from Sally over the next few years) and told him to call her back when his night-terrors had gone. He never did telephone her, and soon he was forgotten.

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There were bigger fish to fry.

In the next county but one, somebody had been taking girls out for rides and frightening them into having sex in the back of a pickup truck. Frightening them to such an extent that none of the eight victims had yet told the police who it was that had committed the crimes.

The police were not very interested in solving the incidents anyway. The women were all unharmed, in the cops' eyes, and that, for most of them, was that. Their main strategy in dealing with the victims was to scare them further by pointing out that it never could have happened had the girls not been present at the scene. Nobody pointed out to the cops that that was a tautology, not a demonstration of how the girls had caused their own downfalls, and most of them never made a second complaint, or even called to remind the police that their cases had not yet been solved. For Bligh County, the phantom dater became simply a fact of life, like rain, or the taxman, about which nothing could be done, since the girls obviously brought it upon themselves.

And then, the story goes, the chief suspect in the cases (that is, the residents' chief suspect; the police never really had one) got himself a girlfriend, and the problem went away.

She was a new girl, from the "big city" two counties over, and she didn't ever complain about the back of Eddie Phaneuf's pickup truck. She and Eddie became something of an item, riding all over the place in his truck and parking anywhere they liked, as long as it was dark enough not to be seen too clearly in the back of the truck.

One night, nobody knows how, Eddie was found tied in the back of his own truck, screaming for help. He wasn't tied up very much. His wrists were bound behind him, and his ankles were loosely shackled with a length of rope between them, but he could easily have gotten himself out of the knots. He could have, that is, had his nose not been securely fastened to the steering wheel by a tight thread that ran through the crack in the back window of the cab. It was looped rather tightly through a tiny hole in the nasal septum (the only blood in the whole case was a drop of it that had dried on the very tip of the nose), and there was another, not very visible thread that may have ended somewhere near his fly. Nobody could be sure, because he was wearing dark clothing. Of his nose, he said he had pins and needles in it for days after the giggling police managed to keep their fingers from trembling enough to unfasten him. Actually, it wasn't the police themselves who did it. Their

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fingers were too bulky and blunt to manage to undo or cut the tiny thread of the loop with any certainty of not removing the organ altogether, so they asked old Madame Cleroux, who lived right on the town square, where Eddie was conveniently parked, and who was a seamstress of considerable local note, to help them.

With the friendly advice of several of the dozen or so onlookers who had gathered when Eddie started screaming, she managed to cut him loose without much more than superficial bleeding.

The news team never aired the tape, saying it was too unpleasant for the early news and not a big enough story for the late. Or maybe it was too violent. But the talk is, you can see that tape for a couple of bottles of good Scotch whisky.

If you see the tape, you can see the thing that really prevented its airing on TV. Eddie's truck had been decorated for him. Around the low walls of the pickup were hanging carefully framed photos. Each was of a woman or girl who had been terrorized in the area within the last few years. Each was hung with carefully arranged black satin, like the photos of dead heroes. Each showed a victim just after she had been interviewed by police. Nobody ever discovered where the leak was; these were the private police photos, and theoretically, nobody had access to them but the cops and the victims, and none of those was talking.

Nobody has seen Eddie with a girl for a very long while.

Sally Whitfield lives alone, now, in the house she inherited when her parents died. She often dates, and is known as a friendly person who never has a bad word to say about anybody. Lately they call her a little eccentric, especially since she's taken to walking about in her house without clothing, carrying a gigantic black cat and singing to it in Welsh, with a shotgun under her other arm. But everybody likes her.

And the odd thing is that even though it's well known that she never wears clothing at home, there aren't any cases of peeping Toms, either. None that are reported, anyhow.

I like her, too. Sometimes we take in a movie together.

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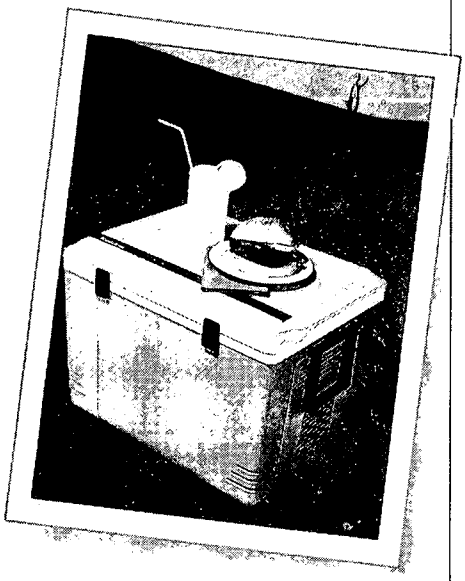
TECHNOLOGY UPDATE



500 miles from nowhere it'll give you a cold drink or a warm burger...

NASA space flights inspired this portable fridge that outperforms conventional fridges, replaces the ice chest and alternates as a food warmer.

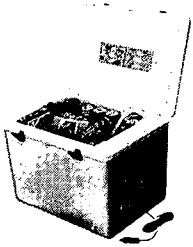
Recognize the ice cooler in this picture? Surprisingly enough, there isn't one. What you see instead is a Koolatron, an invention that replaces the traditional ice cooler, and it's many limitations, with a technology even more sophisticated than your home fridge. And far better suited to travel. What's more, the innocent looking box before you is not only a refrigerator, it's also a food warmer.

NASA inspired portable refrigerator. Because of space travel's tough demands, scientists had to find something more dependable and less bulky than traditional refrigeration coils and compressors. Their research led them to discover a miraculous solid component called the thermo-electric module. The governing module, no bigger than a matchbook, actually delivers the cooling power of a 10 pound block of ice.

From satellites to station wagons. Koolatron is the first manufacturer to make this technology available to families, fishermen, boaters, campers and hunters- anyone on the move. Now for the price of a good cooler and one or two seasons of buying ice, all the advantages of home cooling are available for you electronically and conveniently.

Hot or cold. In the cool mode, the Koolatron reduces the outside temperature by 40° F. With the switch of a plug, the Koolatron becomes a food warmer. It can go up to 125°. And because there are no temperamental compressors or gases, the Koolatron works perfectly under all circumstances.

Empty, the large model weighs only 12 pounds. Full, it can hold up to 40 12-oz cans. The smaller model weighs seven pounds and hold up to six cans.



The Koolatron is available in two sizes, the P24A holds 30 quarts and the P9 holds seven quarts. An optional AC adaptor lets you plug into any regular outlet.

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Koolatron (P9) holds 7 quarts.....**$79** $8 S&H
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a *NEW* Rand story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Retired from Britain's secret service, Mr. Hoch's sleuth Jeffrey Rand is free to find his cases where he may, without the constraint of involvement by Concealed Communications. As a result, his adventures are as fresh as today's headlines, as in this tale of terror in Egypt . . .

EGYPTIAN DAYS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was in the Old City section of Cairo that Rand first encountered the Egyptian astrologer Ibn Shubra. He had wandered the crowded streets for an hour before finally locating the narrow alleyway he sought, part of the elaborate labyrinth of fragile old structures of wood and brick. A century ago, rich and poor had lived together in the Old City, but now only the poor remained among the piles of rubbish and leaking sewers.

Rand had been told to look for a weathered wooden sign with a half-moon on it. He found it near the end of the alleyway, where a bearded man wrapped in rags was asleep on the bottom step. He made his way up to the top floor of the building, knocked, and waited until a tall man in black answered.

"I am looking for Ibn Shubra," Rand said. "I was sent by Max Zeitner, a bartender at the Nile Hilton."

The faint aroma of jasmine reached his nostrils as the tall man stepped aside and motioned him to enter. "I am Shubra. Have you come for a reading?"

"In a way, but not for myself. Max said you could tell me more than anyone about the Egyptian Days."

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"The Days. Yes, I can. Come in." He switched on a dim light by a small table. The room was growing dark in the late afternoon, lit only by the sun filtering through the fine latticework of a meshrebeeyeh bay window. "Have a seat please, Mr. Rand."

"You know my name."

"Max Zeitner called to say you were coming. I had expected you sooner, but the alleys are like a maze to the uninitiated. Might I offer you some tea or a glass of wine?"

"Tea will be fine. I admit to a thirst after my search for you."

He disappeared through beaded curtains and returned in a moment with a cup of strong tea, obviously already prepared. "What do you wish to know about the Days?" he asked, seating himself across the table from Rand. Perhaps for some customers he produced a crystal ball as well as a cup of tea.

"What are they? What effect do they have on people?"

He placed his hands together as if in prayer. Rand could see that the apartment, and perhaps the whole house, had once been the domain of a wealthy merchant or perhaps a lawyer. Had this man lived in such luxury, or had he only acquired the place during its present days of decline?

"I am an astrologer," Ibn Shubra began, speaking in the soft, precise voice of a teacher who begins by stating the obvious. "It was a long time ago that my native predecessors named the unlucky days, days on which no business should be transacted. These became known as the Egyptian Days. Astrologers named two in each month."

"Max was able to tell me that much," Rand persisted, "but I understand that three days each year are especially unlucky. Even people who ignore the others view these as especially baneful."

The tall man nodded. "They are the last Monday in April, the second Monday in August, and the third Monday in December. The worst days of all. The Egyptian Days."

"Next week is the last Monday in April."

"I know that," he replied with a slight smile.

"What can be done to ward off the evil influence?"

"Nothing." He shrugged. "True believers will remain at home and do no work."

Rand leaned forward. "Are you a true believer, Mr. Shubra? Will you be casting horoscopes next Monday?"

Shubra's eyes raised to meet his. "I do what must be done, Mr. Rand, for the good of my people."

* * *

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It was almost evening when Rand returned to the Nile Hilton where he was staying with his wife Leila. It was a return visit for them both, more than twenty years after they'd first met there. In those days Leila had been in graduate school, Rand had been in British Intelligence, and the Russians had been in Egypt. His first sight of her had been in his hotel room. She was twenty-five years old, studying archaeology at Cairo University.

Now, as he entered their room and found her resting on the bed, it all came back to him. "Been out shopping?" he asked.

She opened her eyes and nodded. "It's hot for late April. And I don't remember the city being this crowded." Then she sat up on the bed. "I was just resting. Are we going out to dinner?"

"How about eating downstairs? They have a nice dining room. It's a bit late, and the other good restaurants might be crowded on a Friday night."

Leila gave her sardonic chuckle. "And besides, you hate Egyptian food. Here at the hotel you can dine just as if we were back in London."

"I suppose so," he admitted with a smile. She was still the small, dark-haired woman he remembered from that first night in a different Cairo hotel room, with the pleasing Middle Eastern features that came from her father rather than her English mother.

"What about the astrologer?" she asked after a moment, perhaps only just remembering where he'd been. "Did you locate him?"

Rand nodded. "It took me forever in those Old City alleyways. I was almost ready to give up. His name is Ibn Shubra and he lives in a fancy old place that's been carved up into apartments. There was a ragged man asleep on his doorstep."

"What about the Egyptian Days?"

"Monday is the next one."

"Does that mean Rynox—?"

"I don't know."

"Are you going to call London?"

"I don't work for them anymore," he reminded her, though in truth he'd done so several times since his early retirement. This job had come about not in London but in Cairo, when he'd been recognized by a belly dancer named Emira at Sahara City. It was Emira who'd told him about Rynox and the Egyptian Days.

"Did we come back to Egypt just so you could flirt with a belly dancer?" Leila had asked that night on the way back to their hotel.

"She's almost your age," he said, trying to reassure her.

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"What's that supposed to mean?"

He leaned over and kissed her in the back of the taxi. "She met me once in Athens, years ago. She just happened to remember."

"You do make lasting impressions, Jeffrey."

"She didn't know I was retired. She wanted to tell me about a man called Rynox." He remembered the taxi driver and lowered his voice. Later, in their hotel room, he'd continued the conversation. "This fellow Rynox, according to Emira, is bringing a shipment of plastic explosives from Europe to sell to terrorists here. She thought I could stop him."

"Don't get involved. We're here on holiday."

It was good advice and he might have heeded it except that the very next morning a terrorist bomb went off on a tourist bus, killing three people.

The belly dancer had mentioned a bartender at the Nile Hilton, Max Zeitner, and it was no inconvenience for Rand to seek him out. He was a scowling German who worked the afternoon shift in his own version of the hotel's bartending uniform—an open red jacket worn over a hairy chest and tight jeans. Rand guessed him to be in his late thirties, though trying to appear younger.

"Emira over at Sahara City said you might be able to help me," he said when Zeitner had poured him a beer.

"The dancer?" His eyes showed immediate interest. "Haven't seen her around in a while. How is she?"

"Well enough. I'm looking for a fellow named Rynox and she said it might be difficult to find him this weekend because of the Egyptian Days, whatever they are."

The German snorted. "Superstition, nothing more! You need an astrologer to tell you about the Egyptian Days. I've been here ten years and I still don't understand which ones are important."

"What about Rynox?"

Max Zeitner studied him for just a second before replying, "Never heard of him."

When Rand had finished his beer he asked about an astrologer. The bartender gave him the name and address of Ibn Shubra. Leila was out shopping and he'd left her a note in the room telling where he'd gone, in case he didn't get back. It was a habit of too many years in the trade.

Now, as she prepared to accompany him down to dinner, Leila asked, "Do you really think this man Rynox is a menace?"

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"You read about the bombings. If he's really supplying explosives, he's a menace."

"Why would she tell you about it rather than the police?"

"The Egyptian police can be corrupt. They have a reputation for torture, and people like to avoid them. The British, on the other hand, had troops here until nineteen fifty-one. Some Egyptians still view us as their guardians. Remember the war—we kept Rommel out."

Leila said no more about it during dinner, and when Rand suggested later that they pay another visit to Sahara City she didn't seem surprised. Neither did she seem too agreeable. "Wasn't one night enough? That's the worst sort of tourist trap."

"Perhaps that's what Cairo has become, only with these terrorist bombings there soon won't be many tourists to trap."

"You go without me," she suggested.

"I'd look suspicious. Together we're just two more middle-aged tourists."

"Why don't you just call London and be done with it?"

"There may be nothing to call about. I have to speak with Emira again."

"All right," she agreed finally, reluctantly.

Sahara City was one of Cairo's best-known nightspots, famous for its belly dancers. It was really an open-air complex of nightclubs located just south of the Giza Pyramids, its name spelled out in garish lightbulbs in both Arabic and English. The place held a bizarre fascination for Rand and he always included it on his Cairo itinerary. Perhaps it was the outlandish mix of customers, or the haze of cigarette smoke that hung in the night air, or the sweaty flesh of the dancers.

This night the place was packed with a Friday crowd, tourists and locals. Leila took one look at them and muttered, "So much for a pleasant night at the hotel."

"I promise we won't stay long. I just want to speak with Emira again."

After they were seated in a row of tables a few back from the dance floor, Rand excused himself and circled around to the backstage curtains. A dozen women of varying ages, all voluptuous and heavily made up, waited for their turns to perform. Rand knew from his last visit that they would dance separately and in various combinations, vying for tips from men at the ringside tables.

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"Emira!" he called out, spotting her near the back. She stepped forward quickly, wearing a bright green costume with matching tassels.

"What are you doing here?"

"I have to speak to you again about Rynox."

"Not tonight! Do you want to get me killed?"

"What—?"

"Get out, the show is starting!"

"I've seen Max Zeitner. He sent me to an astrologer—"

That stopped her. "What astrologer?"

"A man named Ibn Shubra."

She closed her eyes and sighed. "It was a mistake talking to you. Get out—someone is here!"

One of the other dancers passed her and said, "Tell him to give us some *kunafah,* honey."

Emira ignored the remark and turned quickly away. She sought shelter among the other girls and Rand could do nothing but retreat as the first dancer went into her act.

"Did you find her?" Leila asked back at their table.

"Yes. She's frightened to talk. I'll try to see her later."

The first dancer was undulating to the music, weaving slowly like a snake emerging from a basket. As the music increased in tempo she began to twirl her tassels and move among the ringside tables. Like the others, she wore a tasseled bra and a low-slung gauzy skirt that seemed about to slide off her hips with every violent undulation. The appreciative males at the front tables were stuffing folded Egyptian pound notes and other currency into the band of her skirt as she danced by.

Rand and Leila watched two other dancers perform before Emira finally appeared. Her bright green costume caught the light, shimmering like a wave over her breasts and hips. The crowd roared its approval.

From every side men reached out to stuff folded bills into her waistband. She seemed to shake more vigorously with each bill, flashing a smile that dazzled. Completing her circuit of the ringside tables, she moved back toward the rear of the stage. It was then that her hand dropped toward her waist, and Rand thought later that she must have felt something rather than seen it.

There was a blinding flash and roar that seemed to come from her gut, and instantly everyone was screaming, running, tumbling over each other in blind panic. The sound of it drowned out the final

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terrible screams from Emira in the seconds before she died. For her, the Egyptian Days had arrived early.

Leila stood staring out the window of their hotel room at the black serpent that was the Nile by night. "My God, I don't think I'll ever forget that for as long as I live," she said, as much to herself as to Rand.

"Nor will I."

"What was it? What killed her?"

Rand had been trying not to think about it, but now he forced himself. "Probably a thin layer of plastic explosive, molded to the size of a credit card, and with a radio-controlled detonator embedded in it. One of the men at ringside wrapped a pound note around it and slipped it into the band of her skirt. Then when she was far enough away from him, he pressed a tiny transmitter in his pocket and the thing went off. It was not a very big explosion, just enough to—" He saw her face and left the sentence unfinished.

"Who would do such a thing?"

"The killer obviously escaped during the panic following the explosion. It might have been this man Rynox, but more likely it was someone he hired. When I spoke to her earlier she seemed afraid of someone, but I doubt if she'd seen Rynox himself."

"Will you call London now, or talk to someone at the embassy?"

"And tell them what?"

"You can't just ignore what happened to that poor woman!"

"Believe me, I won't ignore it." He started pacing the floor. "It might have been my presence there that caused her death, or the fact that I visited the astrologer Ibn Shubra. Someone knew she was talking, and they shut her up in a way that would be a lesson to others."

"But you know nothing about this Rynox. What can you do?"

"I know some key facts about him. He's bringing in a large shipment of plastic explosives, he's superstitious about these so-called Egyptian Days, and if he killed Emira he's utterly ruthless."

"You think he'll wait till after Monday to complete his deal?"

"More likely he'll move before Monday. There's a sense of urgency now that Emira's been killed."

In the morning Rand was awakened by the ringing of the bedside telephone. He glanced at his watch before answering it, noting the time as two minutes after eight. "Hello?"

"Mr. Rand?" A woman's voice, speaking softly.

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"Yes. Who is this?"

"I was a friend of Emira's. I saw what happened last night. I must talk to you."

He hesitated only an instant. "When?"

"This morning? In an hour?"

"Where?"

"In front of the Egyptian Museum. That's in Tahrir Square, very close to your hotel."

"I know," he told her. Beside him in bed, Leila had come awake. "I'll be there in an hour. How will I know you?"

"I'll find you," she assured him and hung up.

"Who was that?" Leila asked sleepily.

"A friend of Emira's. She wants to meet me in an hour."

"Jeffrey—"

"I'll be careful."

The museum was a large stately building more than a hundred years old. It shared the square with the city's central bus terminal where hundreds of people waited along strips of concrete for their crowded but inexpensive transportation to appear. On Saturday morning there was not the bustle of weekdays, but Rand still found the elevated walkway that circled the area to be the fastest way around the square to the museum. From above he tried to pick out the woman who had phoned him, but it was impossible among the variety of faces and skin tones, with Mediterranean and Levantine types mingled with the darker Sudanese immigrants.

When he descended to street level and paused by the museum steps, he quickly realized that the woman on the phone had been none of these. She appeared at his side almost at once, young and lithe and with the pale skin of the Turko-Circassians who had once been Egypt's ruling class. "I phoned you, Mr. Rand," she said simply, falling into step beside him.

"Do you want to go inside?" he asked.

"Let us walk down to the river," she suggested instead. "The museum is not quite open yet."

As they walked he suddenly recognized her. "You were a dancer with Emira. You came on just ahead of her last night."

She barely nodded. "My name is Pasha. Emira was a good friend, almost an older sister to me. I saw you come backstage last night and she told me your name."

"How did you know where I was staying?"

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"I phoned Shepheard's first. When you weren't there I tried the Nile Hilton."

"Good guess. I'm terribly sorry about last night. No one should die like that."

They neared the river and he could see the Cairo Tower on Gezirah Island across the way. A hollow cylinder of lattice walls, it carefully hid its utilitarian purpose as a television mast and revolving restaurant. "It was Rynox who had her killed," Pasha said quietly. "He knew she was talking about his business."

"Who is Rynox? Where can I find him?"

"She didn't tell me that. She told me a lot, but not that. The bombings of tourists horrified her. Somehow she learned he was supplying them with plastic explosives from a plant in Europe—it might have been Czechoslovakia or whatever it's called now. Then she recognized you the other night and asked for your help."

"I'm retired now. I told her that."

"You still have ties to those people. I've heard no one ever really retires from intelligence work."

Rand sighed. She was still young enough to imagine it glamorous work. "I talked to a couple of people. She told me of a bartender at my hotel named Max Zeitner."

"Max was an old friend of hers."

"He sent me to an astrologer named Ibn Shubra to learn about the Egyptian Days."

Pasha frowned. "That's odd. I'm sure Max knows what they are."

"Monday is one of them, isn't it?"

"Yes," she agreed.

"Tell me something. How did Emira know about this man Rynox?"

"I don't know. They were friends, I think, but these recent bombings were more than she could stand. After she spoke to you she told me that maybe you could do something about it."

Rand smiled sadly. "I was a glorified cipher clerk, heading up something called the Department of Concealed Communications. I was never a field agent except by accident a few times."

"Maybe she didn't know what else to do," Pasha suggested. "Can you bring Rynox to justice for what he did to her?"

"I'll try," he promised, wondering what justice had become in the Middle East. Sometimes it was whatever suited the politics of the moment. "Tell me one thing. Did Rynox, or someone who might have been Rynox, ever visit her at Sahara City?"

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"Not that I know of. Certainly there are always male customers wanting to have a drink with us between shows. Usually we don't, unless it's someone we know. Of course, Emira had been working a long time. She knew more people than I did."

Rand thought about it. "I'll do what I can," he promised. "Whoever killed her deserves to be punished. I may contact you again if I need more help."

They parted at the river and he headed back to the hotel. Leila was already gone from the room, planning a few hours of shopping before they met again in midafternoon. Rand breakfasted alone in the hotel's dining room, reading about the Sahara City outrage on the front page of one of the city's English-language newspapers. He was surprised when a bulky man wearing an open shirt asked to join him. When he saw the hairy chest he recognized the hotel bartender, Max Zeitner.

"Sit down," Rand gestured. "You've seen the papers?"

"About Emira, yes."

"I was there," Rand told him. "I saw it happen."

"Terrible, terrible!" He leaned forward, lowering his voice. "I knew her only slightly, hadn't seen her in months. We moved in different circles." It was as if he was distancing himself from the crime, or perhaps from her life.

"She told me to contact you about Rynox," Rand persisted.

A shrug. "I know him by reputation only. A camel trader with a mean streak."

"I think something more."

The bartender ordered breakfast from a hovering waiter, then said, as he had about Emira, "We move in different circles."

Rand finished his eggs and remained sipping his coffee while Max Zeitner ate breakfast, but the conversation shifted to the unusually warm April weather and the influx of tourists. "The bombings haven't had too much effect," Rand observed, trying to steer the conversation in the direction he wanted.

"Not yet," Zeitner agreed. "But if the attacks are stepped up, the result could be disastrous for tourism."

"Some say Rynox is selling explosives to the terrorists."

The German's eyes shot up. "Who says?"

"That's the word I hear. The astrologer, Ibn Shubra, says he cannot work Monday if he is a true believer because of the Egyptian Days. If a deal is in the works, it must be completed before then."

"Never believe everything astrologers tell you."

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"I was sent to him by you," Rand reminded the man.

They paid their checks and walked out to the lobby together. Max Zeitner had the day off from his job but he was working a wedding reception in the upstairs ballroom at one o'clock. They stood looking at the cantilevered staircase that rose dramatically from the foyer to the upstairs ballrooms.

"That staircase is the reason this hotel is so popular for weddings," Zeitner explained. "Everyone can see the arrivals making their grand entrance. We often have two or three wedding receptions or engagement parties on the same day—more than four hundred a year."

"That's a great deal of extra work for a bartender."

"It is indeed! Some don't drink, of course, because they're strict Muslims, but others want it at their weddings. Come by here about one o'clock and you'll see a real sight. The bride and groom will be escorted in by bagpipers."

"Really?"

"It's something left over from British colonial days. The people really like it for special occasions. The entertainment often includes a belly dancer too. That's how I met Emira. She sometimes earned extra money performing at weddings."

"I'd like to see one of them."

"Come ahead! If anyone questions you tell them you're from the newspaper. They won't bother you."

Rand followed him up the impressive staircase to the ballroom floor, then into one of the large rooms where preparations for the wedding reception were already underway. A huge wedding cake, five tiers tall, was being placed carefully on a low table which raised its top at least seven feet off the floor. "How will they reach it?" Rand wondered.

The caterer who'd supplied the cake, a small Egyptian with a moustache and glasses, was busy positioning it just right on the table. "This is Sher Wahba," the bartender said by way of introduction. "Mr. Rand here is writing about your wedding customs."

Wahba turned his eyes toward Rand, always eager for publicity. "How will they reach it, you wonder? With a short stepladder, of course!" He bustled around to the other side of the cake, checking it out. "A large confection like this is a sign of wealth. The groom's family pays for the wedding here and they want the guests to know nothing is too good for them. There will be two hundred here this afternoon, and I have another wedding tomorrow."

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"Two hundred!" Rand stared up at the cake. "This would feed a thousand!"

The caterer chuckled. "The center core and every other tier are artificial, made of cardboard and a bit of plaster decoration. Everyone does it with large cakes."

Rand only shook his head. "Everything is illusion these days!"

Promptly at one o'clock the sound of bagpipes and drums was heard from the staircase. The happy couple entered the foyer and made their way up the stairs to the ballroom. Rand mingled with the invited guests as the pipers were dismissed and a twelve-piece orchestra took over on the bandstand. The room was decorated with hundreds of balloons, with the bride and groom presiding over the festivities from a ceremonial dais at one side of the dance floor.

Rand found a spangled belly dancer preparing to perform after the singer. Her name was Mustafa and she admitted to sometimes working at Sahara City. "Emira?" she repeated. "I've met her. I read what happened. But she never went out with the other girls."

"Did she know an astrologer named Ibn Shubra?"

"I do not believe in astrologers. Some of the girls go to them. I do not."

"Thank you for talking to me," he said, though he'd learned nothing from her.

As he turned away she said, "Emira didn't come with the other girls because she had a lover."

"Who was he?"

"I do not know. She would go to meet him sometimes after work."

Rand met Leila as planned, and looked over the things she'd bought. One, a replica of the painted limestone bust of Nefertiti, had become a symbol of ancient Egypt throughout the world. "I have just the place for it at home," Leila promised. "What have you been up to today? Did you meet that woman who phoned?"

He told her about it, and about the wedding reception at the hotel. "I talk to these people and I get nowhere," he admitted.

"I still think you should call London."

"Who? Parkinson? I don't owe him anything."

There was a show at a Parisian nightclub that Leila wished to see, and they went there in the evening. He spent the time trying not to think of Emira and the man known as Rynox, but by the end of the evening he had decided to pay a return visit to the astrologer

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on Sunday morning. Leila wished to attend mass at one of the Coptic Christian churches in Cairo, and he planned to go then.

Sunday was another day of mid-eighties temperatures and sunny skies, more suited to summer than the last week in April. Some shops were closed, others open, and as he made his way through the twisting alleys of the Old City he wondered why anyone would choose to live there when so many more colorful areas of Cairo were available. The inhabitants, like many of the houses, had seen better days.

At the house where Ibn Shubra resided, Rand could see on his approach that the latticework screens on the upper windows were open, indicating the astrologer was probably at home. A beggar in rags sat across from the entrance to the house, perhaps the same one who'd been sleeping there on Rand's first visit.

The tall astrologer, dressed in black as he had been earlier, answered his knock and stepped aside to let him enter. "I had been expecting your return, Mr. Rand. Our first conversation was not completely satisfactory."

Rand took the same seat he'd occupied on his earlier visit, and once again accepted a cup of tea. "Tomorrow is one of the Egyptian Days," he said. "I thought I should visit you before then. I am seeking a man named Rynox who may be closing an important business deal before tomorrow."

"Rynox—An odd name."

"A dealer in contraband."

"How did you learn of him?"

"From a dancer at Sahara City. She was killed Friday night. You may have seen it in the papers."

Ibn Shubra looked away. "A woman named Emira."

"That's right."

"What is your connection with her? You were sent to me by Max Zeitner."

"She referred me to Max. I'm looking for Rynox, now more than ever."

The astrologer closed his eyes as if deep in thought and put his fingers together as he had on the previous visit. Finally his head jerked up as a telephone rang in the next room. "Pardon me a moment," he said, and went to answer it.

Rand was left alone. He glanced toward the bookcase and walked over to inspect its contents. There was a large mixture of British books and some foreign-language ones, mainly on various aspects

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of astrology and necromancy. He glanced through one or two, working his way down the bookcase. In the next room he could hear the astrologer's low voice on the telephone, but could make out none of the words.

On the bottom shelf were a dozen or so British detective novels from the 1930s. Most had shabby and torn jackets, if there were jackets at all. Rand recognized some but not all of the titles: *The A.B.C. Murders* by Agatha Christie, *The Beast Must Die* by Nicholas Blake, *Murder Must Advertise* by Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Rynox Mystery* by Philip MacDonald—

Rand held his breath as he slid that last title from the shelf and glanced through it. Rynox was the name of a corporation. It was not a book Rand had ever read, so he was unfamiliar with the plot. But that didn't matter. It was the title that mattered.

He heard a noise behind him and turned to see the Mauser pistol in Ibn Shubra's steady hand. "Yes, Mr. Rand," he said quietly. "You have found him. I am Rynox."

Rand let his breath out slowly, weighing the odds if he made a dive for the gun. At the moment they didn't seem too good. "Why did you kill Emira?" he asked. "Or have her killed?"

The tall astrologer held his position. "Whatever you choose to believe about me, I had nothing to do with Emira's death. I loved her."

"What?"

"Emira and I had been lovers for the past two years."

Rand shook his head, unable to put the pieces together. "You were the one she met after work?"

"Yes. She often stayed here with me. Do not look so disbelieving, Mr. Rand. Emira was only ten years younger than me, and even astrologers are entitled to love."

"It's not that. It's— She betrayed you. She told me Rynox was selling plastic explosives to Egyptian terrorists."

"Emira strongly objected to some of my business dealings. She told me once she'd like to stop them if she could do it without hurting me."

"Put down that gun," Rand said. "Let's talk about this. If you didn't kill her, one of your business partners did!"

"No, no, Mr. Rand. The gun is necessary. Explosives and weapons are only a small part of my business. I do not intend to sacrifice

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everything because you were rash enough to be browsing on my bookshelf."

"Tell me who killed her."

"If I knew, I would let you die with the knowledge. But I truly don't know. Certain radical Muslim groups who want to tear down the pyramids and sphinxes for being idolatrous are also opposed to belly dancers. Her death might have been meant as a warning to others. It could have nothing to do with my business dealings."

"You don't believe that any more than I do. The delivery is being made today, isn't it—before the bad-luck day tomorrow?"

Ibn Shubra nodded slightly. "But you will neither find nor prevent it, Mr. Rand. A cubic meter of plastic explosives is too valuable in this part of the world to be bartered away lightly. If Emira died because of it, I mourn her death. I will not mourn yours."

Rand could wait no longer. He hurled the book he still held just as the astrologer squeezed the trigger, then followed it across the space between them, feeling the burn as the bullet creased his arm. Then he was onto Ibn Shubra, wrestling him to the floor, clawing for the gun before the man could get off a second shot. It had been years since Rand had engaged in any sort of prolonged bodily combat, and he felt the strength oozing out of him quickly.

Gasping, he felt Ibn Shubra roll over on top of him. He gave a mighty shove as the man stood, aiming the Mauser, and sent him backward into the latticework screen. Rand heard a breaking of glass, but the astrologer righted himself, still holding the gun.

Rand managed to kick out at his legs as he fired again, missing Rand's head by inches. Then they were tussling again and the weapon flew free, hitting the floor a few feet away. Ibn Shubra broke loose of Rand's grasp and aimed a kick to his head, then dove once more for the pistol. The kick dazed Rand and he was unable to bring Ibn Shubra into focus. He only saw a blurred outline reach for the gun and take a steady aim with both hands.

He had a flash of realization that this man Rynox was about to end his life, here in a dingy Cairo apartment where he might never be found. He thought of Leila as the roar of a gunshot filled his ears, somehow louder than the ones before.

Then Ibn Shubra fell dying across his legs and he looked up to see the short-barreled riot gun held in the hands of the ragged beggar from the street outside.

* * *

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The man who'd fired the shot identified himself as Sergeant Hani Fahmy of the Cairo police antiterrorist squad. As he tended to the bullet graze on Rand's arm, others were already arriving downstairs. "When I heard the first shot I called for assistance," the sergeant explained. "We wanted him alive for questioning, but when I broke in here and saw him about to shoot you, I didn't have much choice."

"I'm eternally grateful," Rand admitted.

"What was going on in here? We've been watching the house for weeks. Saw you visit him on Friday."

"I came looking for a man named Rynox. I'd been told he was selling plastic explosives to terrorists."

"Ibn Shubra was Rynox," the sergeant confirmed. "We've known that for some time. But we've never been able to catch him or any of his associates with explosives. He brings it in from Eastern Europe and somehow it finds its way into the hands of terrorists."

There were other police in the apartment now as Fahmy explained what had happened. Rand was hustled away for a ride to the hospital, though he insisted he was all right. At the hospital they thought differently, examining the bruise on his head where Shubra's kick had landed and speaking darkly about the possibility of a concussion.

Soon after that, Leila arrived at the hospital. "You weren't careful," she greeted him, and he could almost hear the relief in her voice. He didn't look as bad as she'd feared.

"No, I wasn't." He tried to shrug but that made his head hurt.

"What happened?"

"The Cairo police came to my rescue."

"Someone from the British embassy is waiting to see you."

"I don't have time for that. The transfer of explosives is being made today. Shubra admitted as much before he died. I have to get out of here."

"We'll see what the doctor says."

Rand lay back on the bed, frustrated. Before he knew it, he was being interviewed by a British civil servant from the embassy who asked endless questions and promised to contact London the following morning. It was Sergeant Fahmy who brought them the good news at midafternoon.

"The doctors say you can go now, Mr. Rand. Just take it easy for the next couple of days." He nodded to Leila and said, "I'll drive you both back to your hotel." He had changed his beggar's rags for a

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white shirt and pants, possibly part of a police uniform.

They were driven to the hotel in an unmarked car which Fahmy insisted on parking so he could accompany them inside. "We appreciate your help, Mr. Rand," he said with a smile, "but I think we'll be able to handle it now."

"Not unless you can find a cubic meter of plastic explosives that's being transferred today."

"That much?" he asked, doing some quick mental calculations. "It's worth a great deal of money on today's market."

"A cubic meter could weigh hundreds of pounds," Leila commented.

The sergeant nodded. "But it could be in several packages, and probably is."

They were crossing the hotel lobby when Rand spotted a familiar face. It was the dancer Pasha, who'd met him Saturday at the museum. She was hurrying toward the elevator, carrying a canvas bag. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

She glanced uncertainly at Leila and the sergeant. "Emira was supposed to dance at a wedding reception this afternoon. I'm taking over for her."

Rand's head was buzzing. He remembered someone mentioning another wedding today. It had meant nothing to him at the time, and still shouldn't have meant anything. They had weddings at the Nile Hilton almost every day, often two or three at a time. The bartender had told him that. So why should this one be so important?

Was it important enough that Emira had to be killed to keep her from dancing there?

"I'm going up with you," he decided suddenly, following her onto the elevator. Leila and Fahmy exchanged glances and followed along. "Whose wedding is it?" he asked Pasha.

"The son of a Cairo banker. He is marrying a Frenchwoman."

The wedding reception was well under way and Rand was surprised to realize that it was almost four in the afternoon. Max Zeitner was working with another bartender, pouring drinks as fast as he could, and Wahba the baker stood proudly near his latest five-tiered confection. A young woman was singing traditional Egyptian songs on the bandstand, receiving warm applause from those who took time out from their celebrating to listen.

"I'm late now," Pasha said. "I have to change into my costume." She ran around the back of the bandstand.

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"She's lovely," Leila commented, gazing up at the dark-haired French bride on her dais.

"Nothing's going to happen here," the sergeant insisted, "in full view of over two hundred people."

Rand didn't reply. He was remembering that Emira had been killed in full view of several hundred people.

The singer finished with a flourish and it was Pasha's turn. She came through the beaded curtains like a dervish, whirling and undulating to the native music, bringing cheers from the wedding guests. She was faster, younger, and more aggressively sensual than Emira had been, prompting Leila to lean over and whisper in his ear, "That's the girl you were with yesterday?"

"She looks different with all her clothes on," Rand assured his wife.

Even in the slower parts of her dance Pasha was careful to avoid getting too close to the tables. There was no opportunity to stick currency in the band of her shimmering skirt. She was taking no chances.

When she'd finished her dance and the singer had done another set of songs, it was time to cut the cake. Both bride and groom climbed a short stepladder to slice the top tier as cameras and video cameras recorded the scene. Everyone cheered and trays of other confections were brought forth to supplement the thinly cut pieces of cake.

"What are these?" Leila asked Sergeant Fahmy, helping herself to a sticky confection from the tray.

"Ah, *kunafah!* It's an Egyptian sweetmeat, flour paste rolled up with honey, nuts, and raisins—very popular at holidays and festive occasions. Bakers often supply them at weddings along with the cake."

Rand tasted it at Leila's urging and agreed it was quite good. But his mind was elsewhere. "Do you use bomb-sniffing dogs?" he asked Fahmy.

"Of course! We have them trained to detect all sorts of explosives."

"How long would it take you to get one here?"

"It is a Sunday. I would need to get authorization."

"See what you can do. Tell them it's important."

When the sergeant had gone off, Leila asked, "Do you know what you're doing, Jeffrey?"

"I hope so. Come on, let's get a drink."

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Max Zeitner was enjoying a respite at the bar. He winked at Rand and asked, "Enjoying yourself? The drinks are free. A bit of French champagne, perhaps?"

They settled for Egyptian beer, which Leila had always liked. Rand leaned toward the bartender and said, "You sent me to Ibn Shubra because you knew he was Rynox."

Zeitner only smiled and said, "Maybe."

Rand's eyes scanned the room. Almost all the wedding cake had been distributed to the guests. By six o'clock many people were beginning to leave, but there was still no sign of Sergeant Fahmy. "How long do you want to stay?" Leila asked. "We weren't invited, after all."

"A few minutes longer."

Rand caught sight of some white-jacketed men entering the ballroom. Sher Wahba was speaking to the groom's father and gesturing toward the stand for the wedding cake, where everything edible had been transferred to paper plates on the serving tables. As the new arrivals prepared to remove the cake stand, Rand strode forward.

The baker turned, surprised to see him. "Ah, Mr.—"

"Rand. We met here yesterday."

There was a deep-throated growl from the door and the few remaining guests turned in panic. Sergeant Fahmy had returned with his dog, a big German shepherd who headed directly for them. Wahba the baker grabbed for something beneath his tunic and Rand hit him smashing blows with both fists, sending him to the floor.

"That's for Emira," he said, breathing hard. "I wish it could have been more."

It was Sergeant Fahmy who brought them the news a half-hour later, while Rand was soaking his hands. "I hope I broke his jaw," he said as Leila opened the door for Fahmy. "I almost broke my hands."

"You did some damage," the sergeant confirmed. "And my dog sniffed out the plastic explosives hidden inside that cake stand—carefully wrapped packages filling the tall center core and the alternate tiers between the layers of real cake. You'd better tell me something I can put in my report, though."

"Before you killed him, Shubra insisted he hadn't been responsible for Emira's death. He had no reason to lie, since he was about to kill me anyway. And yet I felt sure one of his confederates had killed her. The use of plastic explosives, even just a couple of ounces, tied

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it too closely to his contraband operation. And Emira was frightened by someone she knew in the audience Friday night. You see, the main reason she had to die wasn't just that she was threatening to tell about the delivery of plastic explosives. It was that she was scheduled to perform at today's wedding. With a shipment that large it was safer to kill her than to risk her revealing everything today. Sher Wahba was to deliver the wedding cake plus the explosives, and the terrorists were to take away the cake stand with the explosives still in place. I suppose it was easy for him to smuggle the explosives into the country in a shipment of flour or other bakery supplies."

"They had enough *plastique* in there to blow up the entire hotel! Why would they risk such a thing?"

"It was so unlikely as to be above suspicion. And without a detonator the material is relatively benign. It can be molded into any shape, remember. Terrorists are used to working with it."

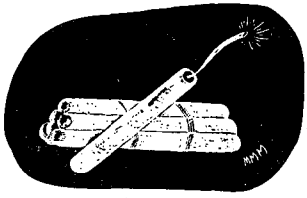
"How did you know it was the cake?"

"What else did Wahba bring that was big enough?"

"But how did you know it was Wahba who killed the girl?"

"When I was backstage with her Friday night, Emira implied she was afraid of someone at the club that night. Another dancer overheard her and obviously knew whom she meant. The dancer told her to ask him for some *kunafah*. I had no idea what the word meant until tonight, when I ate some and you told me bakers supplied it. The dancer knew the man Emira feared was a baker. The only baker at this wedding, the wedding where Emira would have danced had she lived, was Sher Wahba."

Rand and Leila slept late the following morning. The remainder of their holiday seemed rather bland, but perhaps it was just as well. The Egyptian Days had come and gone.



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Frances Usher has written and had published two children's books, but she has always been interested in adult crime fiction, and this is her first effort. The story was submitted at a writers conference in the U.K., where it was evaluated by EQMM *Readers Award winner Peter Lovesey, and eventually found its way to our offices. A special thanks to Peter Lovesey for his efforts on behalf of* EQMM, *and a warm welcome to Frances Usher . . .*

EARLY RETIREMENT

by FRANCES USHER

It was in mid-July that Tony Minnifer loaded his books for the last time into the boot of his car and drove away from the comprehensive school from which he was taking early retirement. By early September he had decided to murder his sister.

It was a logical decision; Tony was a lifelong maths teacher, after all. The package of early-retirement measures thrust upon him by his education authority, desperate for staff cutbacks, and by his new headmaster, who believed that anyone who remembered the twelve-sided threepenny bit must be kept away from the young, had not left Tony a wealthy man.

"Only a pittance really." He stared morosely out into the large neglected back garden.

"Never mind, dear." His wife Stella lifted her head from a leaflet she'd picked up in the library. It was called *Golden Age: Golden Stage.* Only a month before, she'd been made redundant from her own job with a building society. "It says here the retirement years can be the most fulfilling, satisfying, and fun-packed time of your life."

"Can be."

Beaming grey-haired couples were pictured all over the leaflet, sitting outside their immaculate country cottages, leaning on the

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rails of cruise liners, hugging their unnaturally friendly grandchildren on some distant airport tarmac.

"Never mind that lot," said Tony. "All I want is to get this garden in decent shape now there's a bit of spare time. But I can't even afford to do that properly."

It was then that a picture of his only sister Marjorie came into his mind.

He blinked. Now, there *was* an idea. For the first time, early retirement began to hold out a possibility or two.

"We could always sell the car," Stella was saying. "See if we could get bus passes instead."

"No," said Tony. "I think I might be needing the car for a while."

Marjorie lived in Worthing. It was a dark, drizzling evening when Tony drew up outside her house.

"Well, Tony. Quite a surprise."

Marjorie led him into the warm sitting room. Clearly, her accountant husband had left her well provided for.

"You don't mind, do you?" She eased herself back into her armchair, her eyes fixed on the blue-bathed television screen. It was a Conservative Party political broadcast. "Only another moment or two."

"Of course," said Tony. He fingered the rolled-up tie in his pocket. He hadn't worn a tie since the day he'd left the school.

The Tories would be holding their annual conference in a week or two. Unless he took action now, Marjorie would be there in the conference hall as usual, gazing adoringly at the platform with the rest of her well-fed sisterhood. He'd glimpsed her once on a news bulletin, taking part in a fourteen-minute ovation. He'd felt sick.

"Only a moment or two," he said.

Perhaps she saw his reflection in the screen. Perhaps it was a sixth survival sense. She turned at the last second, saw him coming towards her with the tie stretched taut between his hands, screamed . . . and suddenly collapsed over the arm of her chair, her hands scrabbling at her blue twin set, her face purple with pain, terror, and plain simple astonishment.

Tony watched in awe as her chest ceased to heave. Then, slowly, he rolled up the tie again and put it back in his pocket.

"Damn," he said. Trust Marjorie.

He reached for the telephone and began to dial for an ambulance.

* * *

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The legacy made quite a difference to the Minnifers' life. Once the Worthing house was sold Tony was able to buy all sorts of equipment and start laying out the garden in the way that recently he'd been dreaming of. He spent hours ploughing up the rough grass, moving earth, and scooping out trenches. On wet days, he drew plans on squared paper.

Stella, meanwhile, was extending her social life, attending coffee mornings and enrolling in afternoon art classes.

"Tony?" She stumbled towards him across the garden one November dusk. "Whatever are all those stones doing on the drive?"

Tony straightened up, wiping his glasses.

"I'm going to make a rockery," he said. "Over there in the corner. I'll see to it all tomorrow. I'm just off to the garden centre now. See if they've got any alpines I can buy. It won't take long."

The familiar door no longer said "Headmaster." It said "Director of Educational Policy (Studies)." Tony drew a deep breath. Along a distant corridor he could hear the hum of a floor polisher. He pushed open the door.

The headmaster looked up, startled.

"Tony?"

In the shaded lamplight Tony could read upside-down headings on the documents spread on the desk. "Rationalisation of School Dinner Services," he read, and "English in the Service of Industry."

"Was there something you wanted . . . " The headmaster smiled uncertainly. " . . . Tony?"

"Yes," he said, and moved round to the back of the desk. He braced himself against the notice board covered with flow charts and reached into his pocket.

"Oh yes," he said. "Indeed there was."

It was quite dark outside. He'd brought a large plastic compost sack with him and it wasn't too difficult to drag the body, decently wrapped and trussed, over the polished floor the short distance to the outside door. He'd already backed the car close up. Lifting the bundle high enough to topple into the car boot was harder, but he managed it safely and soon he was driving into his garage at home with a warm sense of satisfaction.

Pleasurable, he decided. That was the word. It had been perverse of Marjorie to have had that heart attack at the last moment. Saved

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trouble, of course. But the plan had been ready, and it had been disappointing not to carry it through.

Still, he'd done it this time. He'd made a start.

The rockery looked very nice in the corner of the garden.

"Sort of substantial," said Stella, viewing it from the kitchen window. "Gives the garden quite a focus."

"So will the pool," said Tony, drying a plate. "That's my next job. It's going to be—"

"Shush a minute." Stella turned up the radio. "Did you hear that? About those young criminals? Whatever are things coming to?"

"I know." Tony nodded his head. "Makes you think, doesn't it?"

The research had taken some time, but time was what he had plenty of. And he'd tracked him down now.

Wayne Wilkinson.

To Tony's relief, Stella hadn't argued when he'd told her he was going up to London for the weekend.

"Feel a bit—well—cooped up at home," he said. "After all the hurly-burly of school. Thought I'd look up old Alan again. Get him to take me round some of the sights for a day or two. If it's all right with you, dear."

"Of course." Stella smiled, shuddering faintly to herself. She remembered Tony's old friend Alan and how he'd behaved at their wedding. "You go and enjoy yourself, Tony. Do you good to get away from the garden."

He followed him all day Saturday, the pale pink scalp under the cropped hair unchanged since classroom days. He remembered how the boy used to sprawl back on his chair when reprimanded, digging the point of his pen deep into the back of his hand, and the light blue eyes that stared insolently into his own.

"So?" he'd say. "Gonna make me or somefing?"

Wayne Wilkinson.

There were tattoos now on the backs of his hands and a swastika glittered on his black T-shirt. Tony watched him from across the street, selling illiterate racist magazines. He observed him on the football terraces, jostling and spitting, screaming obscenities with his mates. He trailed him round the streets, saw him shoplifting. Finally he came to rest in the shadows outside a gay disco. Wayne and a group of others were operating a stakeout.

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It was nearly three in the morning before the chance came. Wayne had set off alone behind a couple in blue denim, their heads bent, their hands linked.

The boy was so intent on keeping up with them that he knew nothing of Tony's presence at all, until he felt the whip of the tie around his throat.

"Coffee, dear?"

"Lovely."

Stella took the mug and sipped, lifting her face gratefully to the warm spring sunshine. A blackbird was singing in the apple tree.

"Oh, I do like sitting here," she said. "All that work you put into it, Tony."

Tony smiled. "Worth it, dear," he said. "Even digging that huge great hole half the night, putting in the plastic liner—all of it. All worth it."

His eyes followed the flashing Golden Orfes as they darted and turned in the clear, sparkling water. The purple irises were already tall and budding at the margins of the pool. Soon dragonflies would skim across the surface like threads of shot silk.

Clean, he thought. Clean and pure and washed. Couldn't wish for a better place myself when my time comes.

The main project in the garden after that was the herbaceous border.

"Plenty of mulch, Mr. Minnifer," advised the man at the garden centre. He'd become quite a friend of Tony's by now. "That's what herbaceous borders need. Lots of well-rotted manure, compost, anything like that. Anything you can get your hands on."

"Oh, right," said Tony.

He'd seen the woman on the lunchtime news. She was a member of a think tank on education. She was declaring there was no possible connection between the size of a school class and the quality of learning that took place.

"It just needs a bit of discipline by the teachers," she said. The interviewer's hair blew in the wind but her blond curls remained unmoved. "All it takes is competence." Her voice reminded Tony of a cut-glass vase his mother had once owned.

It was almost too easy. Her address was listed in an old *Who's Who* he picked up at a jumble sale.

He was waiting for her one warm evening as she drove towards the wrought-iron gates that led to her eighteenth-century manor

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house home. Seeing him step out of the bushes, she faltered and reached to wind up the window, but there was no time.

If there had been, she might have told him about her son, about how she'd just taken him to boarding school. But as the maximum number of pupils in a class at that school was twelve, this might not have helped her plight as far as Tony was concerned one little bit.

The lupins were splendid that year, and so were the delphiniums and peonies. When Stella brought her new friends Jane and Angus round one evening for a drink by the pool, Jane was full of envy.

"What I'd give for a husband like yours," she said to Stella. "Angus—" she gave a little laugh. "Not much use in the garden, I'm afraid."

Stella gazed at Angus thoughtfully. He was tall and fair, with warm, dark-brown eyes.

"Never mind," she said. "Gardens aren't everything in life, are they?"

It was perhaps soon after this that Tony Minnifer began to grow a little irritable. Somehow, even now, he still hadn't achieved the fulfilling, satisfying, fun-packed early retirement that *Golden Age: Golden Stage* had promised.

He'd tried to make the world a better place, a cleaner place. And yet . . .

It was Wimbledon Fortnight, perfect weather for once. This would be the first year he wasn't in the classroom, condemned to evening highlights while he still wearily marked exercise books.

He lay back on the sofa, trying to enjoy it. Surely he'd earned a rest.

"Not watching this, Stella?" he said. "Thought you liked tennis."

"It's my local history group," Stella said. "We're exploring the environment today. I might be a bit late." She was gone.

Tony shrugged and turned back to the screen.

There was a new whiz kid this year, a teenage girl born in Eastern Europe, trained in Florida, her hair in bunches and a nasal twang of a voice that spat out insults through a mouthful of teethbraces.

The media loved her. By the end of the first day she'd collected a nickname and a clutch of fans who followed her everywhere, hoping for worse excesses. The newspapers had begun begging for someone to "Crush this kid."

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A challenge, Tony thought. Idly, he began working out how it could be done. A quick trip to London, mingle with the autograph hunters, then—

Better not. Kid like that would be surrounded by security. Shame, though.

The lawn would have been the place for her, smooth and green and velvety as the Centre Court itself.

There was one more, in October. But it wasn't the same. It was almost as if he were just keeping his hand in.

The man had had to go, of course; a local builder responsible for buying up a perfectly harmless copse, grubbing up all the trees, dotting around some "Luxury Executive-Style Homes"—each completed by a triple garage and a stunted rhododendron bush—and christening the whole revolting result Woodland Way.

"I'll woodland way him," Tony promised himself, heaving the sack-covered heap out of the boot. The builder had been a hefty man and Tony wasn't getting any younger.

"Under the new patio for you, I think," he said to the builder. "See how you like the feel of concrete running over you."

He slaved to get the patio finished by the weekend. Somehow the joy had gone out of it a bit; the purity. And where was Stella? She never seemed to be around now when he needed a bit of praise.

On impulse, he rang Angus and Jane and invited them to a barbecue, beginning to savour the notion of roasting meat on the patio.

"Yes, lovely," said Jane, but her voice was listless. "Angus isn't actually here at the moment, but I'm sure he'll come along."

"Good," said Tony heartily. "Great."

But, by the day of the barbecue, everything had changed.

Angus didn't feel much like going, but he supposed one had to make an effort. He walked round to the Minnifers' road and in at their front gate.

He sniffed. There didn't seem to be any whiff of smoke from their back garden. Odd, that. Surely it was time to get the thing lit up.

"*Left* you?" said Stella.

Angus nodded. "Last Monday. Found a note on the table. Bit hackneyed, really. I hadn't realised. She knew all about it, you see."

"About—?"

"Us."

"Ah."

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Stella fiddled with her bracelet, leaning back against the freezer. Outside the kitchen window, it was already dark.

After a minute, Angus said, "Stella?"

"Mmm?"

"Where's Tony?"

Stella smiled sadly.

"He's . . . gone, Angus. I don't think we'll be seeing him again."

"You mean—" Angus frowned. "He knew about us, so he buggered off like Jane?"

Stella shook her head. "I thought it was enough," she said. "More than enough, perhaps."

She stroked the lid of the freezer lovingly, and then straightened up and crossed to the window. They stood close together, arms round each other, looking out at the dark garden.

"Fulfilled," she said. "Satisfied. He was happy while it lasted. And, really, he'd got the garden into very good shape. Who was I to stop him? Early retirement isn't easy, you know, Angus."

"I suppose not." His eyes were puzzled, searching her face.

"It was time," she said. "It could have been cabinet ministers . . . royals . . . So much trouble there'd have been . . . "

She summoned a smile.

"We mustn't get downhearted. There's a lot we can do, Angus, to cheer each other up."

He nodded, a little doubtful.

"Gardening, for instance," she said. "I'm thinking of going down to the garden centre tomorrow to buy a sundial. I thought it would look nice all laid out with fancy paving." She gestured into the darkness. "Out there, in the middle of the roses."

Her voice became pleading.

"A memorial sort of thing, to Tony. To mark the passing hours. You'd help me, Angus, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you, Angus?"

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For a taste of the exotic, San Francisco writer Hayford Peirce takes us to Tahiti where his detective, Chief of Police Alexandre Tama, who first appeared in the 1985 anthology The Ethnic Detectives, *plies his trade. Mr. Peirce himself lived in Tahiti for more than twenty years and conveys wonderfully the flavor of the island . . .*

A COFFIN FOR A BANKER

by HAYFORD PEIRCE

Even on an island of notably stout trenchermen, Alexandre Tama, *commissaire de police,* was justly celebrated for both his appetite and his girth. He and his family had just returned to Tahiti from a month's vacation in France, the chief of police wedged into two adjacent economy-class seats that had been specially configured by the accommodating French airline for his oversized figure. Tama was always glad to return home, for while French cuisine was of course the finest in the world, he had a single reproach to make of it: it was never served in sufficient quantities.

Now, the second evening of his return to duty, he was pleased to find himself at a traditional Tahitian feast on a gaily decorated covered terrace where a childhood friend was celebrating his recent promotion to minister of education for French Polynesia, that far-flung archipelago in the South Pacific of which Papeete on the island of Tahiti is the capital.

Bright green fronds of coconut palms had been spread along the top of the long table and bottles of red and white wine alternated with red and orange soda pop and quarts of Hinano beer. Great platters of marinated raw fish passed from guest to guest, along with thick slices of purple taro and French bread, three kinds of cooked bananas and plantains, diced chicken in spinach and coconut cream, fish that had been baked, fried, and boiled, and, finally, crispy pieces of an entire pig from an underground oven. Three elderly Tahitian women in bright orange muumuus sat at one end

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of the table strumming traditional island songs on guitars and homemade ukuleles.

The gargantuan chief of police mopped the sweat from his broad mahogany-colored forehead. A gaudy red napkin was tucked into the snowy white shirt that billowed across the enormous mound of his rotund belly and a glass of chilled red wine perched precariously on the slope of the napkin. "—and that," he concluded to a roar of appreciative laughter from around the table, "is how your chief of police solved the mystery of the three missing coconut trees!"

He raised the glass of wine to his lips and downed its contents in a single triumphant swallow. His face contorted and he gulped convulsively, as if in distress. His great shovel-like hand reached to his mouth and to his astonishment pulled a dark red rose from its interior. As the guests along the table gaped, he pulled forth a second rose and then a third, and finally an entire bouquet. Shaking his head in bewilderment, he handed the flowers to the flabbergasted Tahitian woman on his left. "I *knew* there was something peculiar about the bouquet of that wine," he muttered with a perfectly straight face.

The thirty dinner guests groaned loudly and Tama's diminutive Tahitian wife sighed in resignation. While she and the three children had spent two days in Disneyland and Universal Studios during their two-day stopover in Los Angeles, her husband had deserted them for the Magic Castle in Hollywood and the shops that catered to professional magicians. An extra suitcase had been purchased to accommodate the latest additions to his collection of magical paraphernalia. If only he could find some less tiresome hobby such as playing pétanque in the garden on Sunday afternoons like all the other policemen in Tahiti . . .

"If you think *that's* funny," said the new minister of education in his loudest public-speaking voice, "wait till you hear *this* story! I got it this morning from the head of the lycée—his wife's a friend of the woman involved and it's absolutely true. A real Tahitian story, just wait till you hear it!"

"Hrmph!" If stories were being told, Alexandre Tama preferred to be the center of attention, but it was not his party after all, so after pulling a lighted cigar from the ear of the startled French architect to his right he sat back politely to listen to the minister. Halfway through the story he began to chuckle along with the rest of the table, and at its sudden startling denouement he uttered a bark of harsh laughter mixed with shock. He shook his great head. For once

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his boyhood friend the minister had been absolutely precise in what he said: this really *was* a Tahitian story.

But as the tempo of the music quickened and the more physically agile at the table jumped up to dance away some of their heavy dinner in the crowded living room, the chief of police began to puff increasingly thoughtfully at his long thick cigar . . .

The next day he summoned his aide and chauffeur, Inspector Opuu, to his utilitarian air-conditioned office in the police station next to the Palace of Justice. Inspector Opuu had been born in the searing dry heat of a Tuamotu atoll and was as lean and leathery as Alexandre Tama was round and smooth. He was dressed neatly in dark blue pants with a light blue shirt and this morning had tucked the small white bud of a *tiare Tahiti* into the long black hair over his right ear. Tama waved him to a folding metal chair on the other side of his plain metal desk and settled back in his own enormous custom-made chair of shiny *tau* wood. "Have you heard about this Swede?" he asked in the clear accent of the Loire Valley that he had acquired in his youth at the University of Angers.

Inspector Opuu frowned. "There *was* some bizarre story . . . "

"Extremely bizarre," agreed Tama drily. "Now this is how it was told to me . . . "

Charles Nystrom was a retired Swedish banker who was tall and thin and looked older than his fifty-eight years. He apparently had no family in Sweden and upon his retirement had come to Tahiti along with his French wife, Brigitte, who was thirty years his junior and as pert and saucy as Nystrom was dry and withered. They rented an expensive villa in the hills of Pamatai just behind town, with a fine view of the harbor and the jagged outline of the island of Moorea on the horizon.

At first Charles Nystrom spent most of his time at home, content to lie in the sun beside the sparkling blue pool, while his gay young Parisian wife was making a wide circle of acquaintances and spending a considerable part of each day lunching and shopping in town with her new female friends. Charles Nystrom's only apparent interest was bridge. Eventually he joined a bridge club and began to play first in the weekend tournaments, then in their Wednesday afternoon and evening matches.

It was a Wednesday afternoon, about a year after the Nystroms' arrival in the territory, that the frail Swede suddenly felt ill at the

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bridge table. He carefully excused himself and drove slowly back to his isolated home in the steep green hills. It was midafternoon, and as usual the Tahitian maid and gardener had both left soon after lunch. Rather to Charles Nystrom's surprise, his wife's shiny silver Mercedes coupé was in the garage, for he knew that normally she spent her Wednesday afternoons in town. He was even more surprised when he walked into their bright airy bedroom with its broad French windows opening onto the pool and found his handsome young wife in bed with another man.

As in all the best bedroom farces, the man in question made a dive for his clothes and leapt past the gaping cuckold to disappear with a flash of naked flesh into the poolside hibiscus bushes, while the startled wife cowered behind a hastily drawn-up sheet. Where the scene diverged from farce, however, was in the strangled noise that Charles Nystrom uttered just before clutching his chest and collapsing to the bedroom's tiled floor with a massive heart attack.

An ambulance was summoned and the unconscious Swede was transported to the hospital, where he lay for four days in the intensive-care ward. At last his tearful wife was told that no hope remained and that she should see to the funeral arrangements. Charles Nystrom had once expressed his wish to be interred in his family plot in the forests near Borlänge, and his guilt-stricken wife—soon now to be a wealthy widow—determined that his remains would be transported to Sweden in the most imposing casket available.

In a narrow dark valley not far from the hospital, she found the Chinese woodworker who slapped together most of the cheap pine coffins used for burials in Tahiti as well as building the hermetically sealed steel containers in which the international airlines required that all coffins be enclosed for shipment. Here she contracted for a coffin such as the delighted artisan had not constructed in years: a noble casket of gleaming African ironwood, lined with the finest of velvet and satin and incorporating all the massive silver angels and fittings that he had long ago given up any hope of selling. Hardly daring to breathe, he scrupulously calculated the overall cost and presented the grieving widow-to-be with the estimate. Brigitte Nystrom nodded tearfully and dashed back to her silver coupé. Whistling cheerfully, the Chinese craftsman summoned his two Tahitian assistants and carefully set to work.

The casket was finished in the final hour before dawn and as if in response, the dying Swede's heart fluttered tremulously once, twice,

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and then settled down to a steady, powerful rhythm. The doctor who visited him at nine o'clock was astonished to find him still alive and was even more astonished when his patient was discharged from the hospital four weeks later, thin and pale, but alert and eager to return to the bright sunlight of his home in the hills.

His chastened wife Brigitte had kept a faithful bedside vigil during the long weeks in the hospital; now she welcomed him home with all the love and tenderness that had first captivated the middle-aged banker. His color returned and under her careful ministrations he daily waxed in strength. Friends were encouraged to visit, and by the end of two months the happy couple had organized an afternoon bridge party. It was, apparently, a near tragedy that had nevertheless had a happy ending.

Three months after Charles Nystrom's discharge from the hospital, the chimes to the front door of his home rang softly one afternoon. The retired banker opened the door and frowned in puzzlement. A battered gray pickup truck was in his driveway, while a small Chinese in dark shorts stood by the doorway, an envelope in his hand.

"Good day, monsieur," said the Chinese. "I've come to deliver your coffin." He smiled politely and gestured to indicate a large steel container to one side of the doorway. "And inside . . . " He opened the container to proudly reveal a gleaming casket of dark red wood with a number of shiny angels and fittings. While Charles Nystrom's eyes widened in shock, the Chinese extended the envelope. "And here, monsieur, are the costs . . . "

Alexandre Tama pinched the end of his nose and scowled darkly. "A beautiful Tahitian story, Opuu, except for one thing."

Inspector Opuu nodded. "Yes. Except for—"

"The fact that this wretched Swede dropped dead of a heart attack upon being given the bill for his own coffin!" The *commissaire de police* sat back in his *tau*-wood chair with an enormous sigh. "I suppose that this time he really *is* dead?"

"We had a paper from the hospital saying he was, along with a request from the airline for permission to transport the coffin through town and out to the airport."

"I see," said Tama, swiveling around in his chair to look out of his second-floor window at the grass courtyard of the Palace of Justice. "As Tahitian stories go, it's an awfully good one. Too good, really . . . " He turned around again so that his great belly scraped

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against the edge of his desk. "And he only died three days ago?" He cocked his head at his desk calendar. "There's no direct flight for Europe until the day after tomorrow—I suppose that's the one the coffin will be on?"

Inspector Opuu nodded.

The chief of police glanced at the bright sunlight that flooded the grassy courtyard below his window, then surged to his feet with a surprisingly graceful motion. "Confound it, Opuu, I didn't become a policeman to shuffle papers back and forth across my desk like every other pension-hungry bureaucrat on this island of functionaries! That wretched Swede dropped dead here in town, in Pamatai. That's *our* jurisdiction, not the gendarmes'. Go get the car: a policeman should be a policeman, not a miserable paper-pusher!"

Alexandre Tama pulled himself from the front seat of the long black Citroën with the aid of a stout metal tube that had been welded to the top of the car's fender and stepped gingerly through the sawdust and scraps of wood that littered the tiny courtyard in front of Ah Ping Lii's woodworking concern in the Titioro Valley. It was housed in a dilapidated building of sheet metal, and the ear-splitting sound of a band saw vied with the deafening percussion of something galvanized being beaten by a Tahitian with a large hammer.

A small, sallow Chinese with lank black hair and wearing a tattered brown bathing suit came out from the depths of the workshop, a chisel in one hand, a mallet in the other. *"Monsieur le commissaire,"* he said, extending his right wrist for Tama to shake.

"My assistant, Inspector Opuu," grunted Tama, running his eyes over the cramped atelier. "So this is where you make the coffins. Tell me about this superdeluxe casket you made for the Swede."

The craftsman's eyes widened in alarm. "Is . . . is there something wrong with it?"

Tama snorted explosively while Inspector Opuu snickered sardonically. "Wrong with it? Aside from using it to drum up business by killing your clients, what would be wrong with it?"

"Killing . . . killing my clients?" The shiny black eyes grew wider yet. "I . . . I don't understand."

"Well? Isn't that what happened? You delivered this million-franc casket to a customer who had been inconsiderate enough not to need your services, and when he saw your bill he was kind enough to drop dead at your feet after all." Tama leaned forward as much as

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the bulk of his stomach would allow and glared balefully at the trembling Chinese. "And *then* what did you do?"

"But . . . but . . . that isn't at all what happened! He . . . he called me and told me to deliver it. So I delivered it the next day and—"

"Wait!" interrupted Tama sharply. "He called you and *told* you to deliver it? Charles Nystrom himself?"

"Well . . . I *think* so. He said . . . No, wait! Maybe it was his wife . . . It was a woman, I think. . . . Yes." The Chinese bobbed his head up and down decisively. "It was his wife, the woman who ordered the casket. She telephoned and told me to deliver it to Pamatai the next afternoon."

Tama nodded sceptically. "And then?"

The coffin maker shrugged in bewilderment. "I delivered it. Monsieur Nystrom came to the door, told me to put the casket in the garage and that he'd send me a check."

"He told you to put it in the *garage?* He didn't clutch his chest and fall down dead at your feet?"

"No, of course not! He was a little surprised to see the casket, but then he laughed and said he would fill it up with champagne bottles and float it in his pool at his next party." The Chinese shook his head at the inscrutability of the mysterious West.

"Hrmph!" grumbled Tama as he climbed into the front seat of the black Citroën sedan. He turned the air conditioner to high and pulled an enormous red bandanna from his pants to dab at the sweat that was beading his forehead. "According to *him,* our dying Swede was in perfect health and practically dancing a jig around his own coffin when he left. What do you think, Opuu?"

The wiry inspector was busy at the wheel of the Citroën, guiding the car down the narrow road that wound through the Valley of Titioro, and it was a moment before he replied. "I think before we go any further we better see the people at the hospital. The next thing we know, this dead man will be playing center-forward for the Bordeaux Girondins."

"For his sake let's hope so." The chief of police shook his head with an air of somber disappointment. "I *told* you this story was too good to be true!"

But Nystrom was dead. That was settled as soon as they reached the hospital. The smiling Tahitian woman in records had a large red and white hibiscus tucked into her glossy black chignon and

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was nearly as round as Alexandre Tama. She quickly found the file for Charles Nystrom and let the chief of police study it. "He's dead all right," muttered Tama, "cardiac arrest." He glanced at the file again. "Let's stroll over to the emergency ward."

The emergency ward was on the far side of the modern four-story hospital, and there they found four orderlies and ambulance drivers playing cards while a nurse and the supervisor stood behind them and offered loud advice. A telephone jangled noisily but went unanswered until at last it stopped ringing. The players around the table glanced up at Tama and Opuu without interest and returned to their game.

"Hrmph!" trumpeted Tama and there was instant silence in the large airy room that nevertheless smelled overwhelmingly of ether. "Now then! Who's in charge of this kindergarten?" He glared angrily at the tall, thin Chinese woman who appeared to be the supervisor and pulled his credentials from his pocket. His face was grim. Six inhabitants of his bailiwick who didn't recognize their chief of police! Intolerable! "Or should I say: who *was* in charge of this playpen until such time as I speak to the head of the hospital!"

"Please, monsieur," said the supervisor, "what can we do for you?"

"That's better," grumbled Tama, perching himself precariously on a small metal chair. "This Swede who died of a heart attack up in Pamatai a few days ago: tell me about it."

But there was little to tell. The supervisor opened the daily logbook and turned the pages back. "There," she said, pointing at a penciled entry. "At fifteen thirty-eight Monsieur Nystrom called to say he was having an attack and would we send an ambulance."

"And who took the call?"

"I did, monsieur," said a good-looking young man in a white smock. His curly hair was glossy black and his skin as golden brown as that of the Tahitian attendants, but his accent was clearly from the south of France, probably Nice. "I remember because I was the duty driver that afternoon, and as soon as I hung up, I got the ambulance and went to get him."

"I see. And when you got there?"

"There was a car in the garage but no answer at the door. After a while I walked around the side of the house and came out by the pool. All the doors to the house were open, and when I looked in the living room there he was, lying on the couch."

"He was dead?"

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"I thought so at first, but he was still breathing very faintly. I got him on the gurney and into the ambulance, but by the time we got back to the hospital he was already dead."

"You tried to reanimate him?" he asked the supervisor.

"Yes, sir. But it was hopeless."

"Hrmph." Alexandre Tama stroked his chin pensively. He turned back to the ambulance driver. "And did you see this famous coffin of his?"

The young Frenchman's eyebrows lifted in bewilderment. "Coffin, monsieur? What coffin is that?"

The chief of police had already surged to his feet. "Never mind. Where's the doctor who certified this death? There *is* a doctor somewhere in this madhouse, I presume?"

Dr. Baudchon was on detached duty from his required military service with the French army. He was tall and young, robustly handsome, and spoke rapidly through clenched teeth with the nearly impenetrable accent of Toulouse. The long corridor outside his office was filled with two dozen or more Tahitians with a variety of bandages and wailing children. Standing behind his desk, Dr. Baudchon ran his hands through his dark brown hair in a harassed manner and blinked at them through thick tortoiseshell glasses. "The Swede? The one who had the heart attack a couple of months ago? Of course I remember him. A miracle he lived. Nothing to do with us—just a miracle."

"That I can certainly believe," agreed Tama drily. "And when you saw him again a few days ago?"

Dr. Baudchon shrugged impatiently. "Dead. I remembered his medical history; I did an examination—all the visible symptoms of a heart attack. I signed the certificate and—"

"You didn't do an autopsy?"

The young Frenchman stared at Tama in astonishment. "An autopsy—here in . . . ?" He waved his hand expressively to indicate the chaos that awaited him beyond the closed door of his office. "Why on earth would we do an autopsy?"

"It was nip and tuck with the *procureur,*" reported Tama to Inspector Opuu as he returned from the Palace of Justice, "but he finally agreed. He'll order an autopsy."

"Frankly, I'm surprised," said Opuu. "There isn't much to go on."

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Tama nodded. "I had to promise to show him my vanishing-coffin trick before he'd go along."

The inspector rolled his eyes lugubriously, for he had long since tired of his boss's endless series of childish tricks. "Threatened him, more likely! Can you *really* do the vanishing coffin?"

"With the *procureur*'s wife inside? Wouldn't he love it!"

Alexandre Tama had never had a taste for thin blond *popa'a* women, and as he eyed Brigitte Nystrom, the widow of the deceased Swedish banker, he wondered what anyone, even a dried-up old stick of a bridge player thirty years her senior, found so attractive about her. Her limp blond hair was dull and matted, and her brown eyes protruded slightly. Others may have considered her tall and svelte; to Tama she was tall and skinny and rabbity, with hunched-over shoulders and breasts that were too large for what was sure to be a scrawny chest. She wore a plain white dress with a gold locket at her neck, a gold watch on one wrist, and a heavy gold bracelet on the other.

Bright sunlight poured into the spacious living room through sliding glass doors that opened onto a covered terrace and a sparkling blue pool. The jagged outline of Moorea could be seen on the horizon beyond a neatly trimmed hedge of *aito* pine. She licked her lips nervously while Tama and Opuu seated themselves on the same pale blue divan of her living room where presumably Charles Nystrom had writhed in his death throes; she herself sat on the edge of a straight-backed chair with her hands clasped tightly together in her lap. There was nothing about her of the pert and saucy Parisian Tama had expected to find.

The news that her late husband had been smothered instead of dying of a heart attack broke what little composure she had possessed. She had fallen back in her chair and sobbed noisily while Tama looked on coolly, asking himself if she could be as fine an actress as all that. Finally he shrugged. Who could tell what women really thought, especially *popa'a* women? Inspector Opuu offered a tissue and a glass of water. Her sobbing stopped and the interrogation began.

They quickly learned that her husband had never been married previously, and that their own marriage had taken place in Lyon, where Brigitte Giraud-Roux had been the receptionist at a celebrated two-star inn, Le Père Grisou.

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"Ah," said Tama, brightening. "Their salmon in sorrel sauce—a masterpiece! So you worked *there,* well, well! But what this means is that under French law you inherit the entire estate."

"I . . . I suppose." Brigitte Nystrom looked down at her hands and blinked rapidly.

"It's substantial, I imagine."

The widow shrugged helplessly.

Tama scowled in exasperation. This mouselike blonde had no spirit at all! It was hard to imagine her smothering anybody, even the most helpless of invalids. And yet . . . and yet: she undeniably had a motive, *and,* according to the gossip, this whole sad story had begun by her cuckolding her husband with a younger man. Perhaps her husband was about to divorce her; they had a marriage contract that separated their property; in the case of a divorce Brigitte Nystrom would receive nothing at all of her husband's wealth—the prospect of *that* might have impelled her to sudden reckless action . . .

But another half an hour of questioning left him no farther along. She denied that she and her husband were on the point of breaking up, and tearfully but adamantly refused to name her former lover, declaring that the episode had been a one-time madness for which she would now be punished the rest of her life. Tama snorted in disbelief, but was unable to shake her resolve. A rabbit with *backbone,* he told himself disgustedly.

She indignantly denied calling the Chinese cabinetmaker and ordering the delivery of the casket to their home in the hills. And the day of her husband's death she had driven to town to join three other women, all of them French, for a day's excursion to a waterfall on the other side of the island. Charles Nystrom was in good health when she left, dead at the hospital when she returned. Inspector Opuu carefully took down the names of the other women and they took their leave, letting themselves out the front door while Brigitte Nystrom sobbed silently in the living room.

The maid and the gardener, middle-aged Tahitians who came up the mountain road by scooter six mornings a week, had not yet left for the day. Tama and Opuu questioned them in Tahitian in the shade of a broad flame tree bursting with bright red flowers. Both of them declared that Madame had been a faithful and loving wife ever since the poor monsieur had returned from the hospital and that Monsieur was apparently radiantly happy. Certainly they had never seen them quarreling, or any evidence of a lover.

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"Hrmph," muttered Tama as they looked into the garage, which housed only a gray Renault and a silver Mercedes coupé, "not even the coffin's there. Came back to get it when he *really* died, I suppose." His lips tightened. "Well, Opuu, you can check out Madame's alibi, but I'm afraid it's going to stand up." He mopped his head with his bandanna. "And if *she* didn't smother him, who did?"

Inspector Opuu shrugged. He pointed at the lush green hillside that surrounded the house. "Look at all of this, no neighbors at all. Anyone could have driven in, or even walked in through the bushes, without being seen. You saw all those sliding glass doors: the house is probably open all day long. A couple of Tahitians skulking through the hills, looking for a bottle of whiskey or a stereo set to pinch. Nystrom was taking a nap, woke up, surprised them, they panicked—"

"Hrmph! In the middle of the afternoon they were doing this?"

The inspector shrugged again. "Then who else? The Chinese who brought the coffin?"

"Ha!" cried Tama happily, "the invisible man! The stooge in the audience that nobody notices! He brought the coffin, he unloaded it there by the door. Charles Nystrom comes to the door, is shown his own coffin, handed a bill for a million francs! What would *you* do, Opuu?"

"Me?"

"You'd yell and scream and wave your hands, that's what you'd do," amplified Tama with relish. "The *nerve* of this guy! You'd tell him to scram! You'd grab him by the collar, you'd start shaking him, he'd resist, he'd knock you down, he'd grab a pillow, he'd . . . " Tama's eyes flashed with excitement. "Well, you can imagine the rest of it. Excellent, Opuu, excellent! We'll make a detective of you yet!"

"Have it your own way," grumbled the inspector as they walked back to the Citroën, "but you'll see: this case isn't like any of your fancy magic tricks, it's just a couple of Tahitian kids prowling through the bushes, maybe a voyeur looking for naked women by the pool who—"

"Opuu, Opuu, Opuu," sighed the chief of police as the Citroën sagged under his sudden enormous weight. "Leave me my illusions, will you? What little fun there is in police work you're always trying to take away."

"Fun, ha!" The inspector snorted lugubriously. "I suppose you want to go see this coffin maker again."

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"I do."

"*Oui, mon général.* And after that—I'll start rounding up all the *voyous* in town."

"Ha!" chortled Inspector Opuu forty minutes later as the Citroën pulled away from Ah Ping Lii's noisy workshop in the dark, dank Titioro Valley. "How's *that* for an illusionist's trick? You forgot that one little Chinese cabinetmaker doesn't haul 300-kilo coffins around all by himself, he's got his *own* stooges in the audience!"

"All right," said Tama sourly, "rub it in." He scowled again as he thought of the two husky Tahitians who worked for Ah Ping Lii. It was they who had unloaded the coffin at Nystrom's hillside house, and both of them unhesitatingly backed up the Chinese casket maker's fervent declaration that his brief meeting with the Swedish banker had been entirely amicable. One of them had broken into a hideous gap-toothed smile. "He even told us to come back and see it when he'd put it beside the house and filled it up with plants."

Tama snorted in disgust as he let the cool waves of the Citroën's air conditioner lap over him. This was far from being a brilliant sally out of the office and into the field. Perhaps he should return to his paperwork after all and leave Opuu and the other policemen in the brigade to do their job, rounding up the usual bands of disaffected young delinquents and eventually wringing a confession from one of them. *That,* he had reluctantly to admit, was how police work was handled in Tahiti, an island where invisible men remained the illusions of his own mind. . . .

Invisible men. Invisible men . . . Ha! Tama jerked his great bulk around in the seat to lay his hand on Inspector Opuu's shoulder. There was one last trick for a master illusionist to play before turning this case over to Opuu and his team of plodding gumshoes . . .

"The hospital, Opuu, there's something I want to look at again in the emergency room."

Later that afternoon, after Tama had returned from his usual two-hour lunch break, they sat at the police chief's gray metal desk and studied the photocopy of the emergency room's log for the day that Charles Nystrom had died. "Here's Nystrom," said Tama, stabbing the page with an enormous brown finger. "His call was booked at three thirty-eight. From noontime till three thirty-eight there are three other calls logged in. And from three thirty-eight until six o'clock that evening there are another four calls." Tama tapped his

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finger against the side of his face. "All right, Opuu, so you want to do routine police work? Very well. I want you to find out . . . "

Although it was only seven-thirty in the morning, the sun was already well above the towering green mountains of Tahiti's rugged interior. It beat down mercilessly on the shimmering tarmac where a shiny blue and white DC-10 jetliner was being loaded with suitcases and cargo for the nine o'clock flight to Paris. Alexandre Tama stood with Inspector Opuu in the cool shade of its broad wing and watched as a red forklift slowly raised a large metal container and carefully deposited it into the dark bowels of the enormous plane.

"Poor Nystrom," said the chief of police as he blotted the sweat that was rolling off his face, "he got to use his fancy coffin after all."

"So at least Ah Ping Lii is happy." Inspector Opuu snorted sardonically. "I imagine he's the *only* one in this affair who is."

"*I'm* happy," said Tama, surprised. "I arrested a murderer, didn't I?"

Opuu snorted again. "*I* would have gotten him just by asking around until I found out who this Nystrom woman had been sleeping with. What made *you* think to check out that hospital log?"

Tama tapped his temple with an index finger and favored the inspector with one of his infuriating smiles. "Just thinking like a magician, Opuu. In every trick there's *always* a stooge, or misdirection, or an invisible man. Just because the first invisible man I thought of, the cabinetmaker, was the wrong one, didn't mean there wasn't another. And who's more invisible than the ambulance driver who comes to pick up a patient?"

Inspector Opuu scowled. "In other words—you were just guessing."

Tama scowled, but halfheartedly. "Well—perhaps just a teensy bit. But then I said to myself, suppose it *was* the ambulance driver: he's a flashy young Niçois with lots of teeth and curly hair, everything a young woman married to an old banker might find attractive. And once the banker's gone, this Salvetti might get to thinking, a wealthy young widow like that isn't going to remain alone forever. Why shouldn't her consolation be himself? The prospects didn't look so bright when Nystrom recovered from his heart attack, but then he saw how he might be able to arrange a murder and make it look like natural causes."

"So he called the coffin maker and told him to deliver the coffin. Everyone would think that he'd died of shock."

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"Using a woman's voice," agreed Tama. "That's easy enough to do over the phone. Then he sits around in that madhouse of an emergency room where the attendants play cards and nobody answers the phone, and waits for the phone to ring. 'Come quickly, I'm having a baby,' says Madame Tetuanui. 'I'll be right there, Monsieur Nystrom,' he says, and logs Nystrom's name into the book."

"And drives in his ambulance up to Pamatai, where he smothers old Nystrom and brings the body back to the hospital. Not bad," said Opuu admiringly as the cargo hatchway above them was slammed shut. "But would Salvetti ever have admitted it if *I* hadn't found that Tetuanui woman who called in an hour later to complain that the ambulance hadn't come yet?"

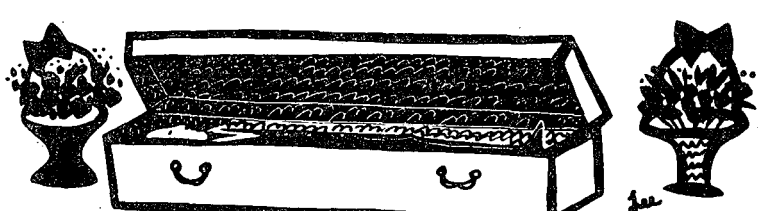
Tama shrugged. "It was a nice idea he had, but like any nice magic trick, once you know how it works everything becomes pretty obvious. Now that we know it's him, we can *prove* he had been Brigitte Nystrom's lover, we can *prove* he didn't go to pick up Madame Tetuanui when she called in, we can *prove*—"

"—but can we prove that Brigitte Nystrom was the one who asked him to murder her husband?" asked Opuu as they moved back to the departure lounge and watched the first passengers begin to climb the boarding ramps.

Tama sighed. "Not a chance. Especially now that Salvetti is screaming that *she's* the one who made *him* do it. No jury is going to let an obvious gigolo like that shove the blame onto a helpless woman."

"So you think she'll get off."

Alexandre Tama stepped to the refreshment counter of the departure lounge and ordered two coffees and four croissants. "You're going to try to convict a woman who's just spent a million francs to buy a coffin for her husband's body when she could have got a pine box for five thousand?" Tama bit into the first of the croissants and shook his massive head. "No, it's like the old coffin trick: she'll get out of it, and she isn't even Houdini."



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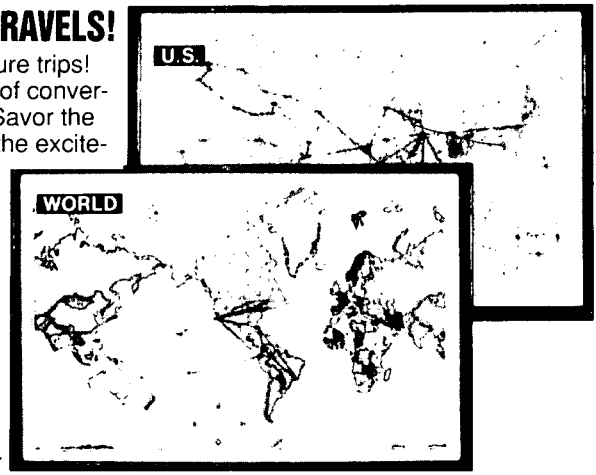

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a ***NEW*** **short story by**

WILLIAM BANKIER

William Bankier has held a variety of part time jobs since retiring from a career in advertising to devote more time to writing fiction. His previous occupations provided seeds for several earlier EQMM *stories; in this new L.A. story, he writes of something very close to him indeed, for Mr. Bankier and his wife are currently managers of an L.A. apartment complex . . .*

A FOOL AND HIS MONEY

by WILLIAM BANKIER

It began with pain between the eyes, sharp as a knife going in. Ken Rose could taste the red wine he had been drinking, but everything else was agony. He closed his eyes and waited for the misery to stop. When it did, he said, "That was a doozie."

"What was?" Zora was working the crossword puzzle from the Sunday *Times*.

"Felt like I was stabbed in the head."

"Has it stopped?"

"Thank the Lord."

"It's residual pain. You were severely injured when your head went through that windshield."

There was a splash of wine left. Ken drank it and put the empty glass out of reach. He felt hungry; he should have eaten an hour ago.

Now a strange thing happened. Zora was suddenly at the front door of the apartment. She opened it and took one step outside. Then she came back in and closed the door, saying, "The weatherman is crazy. It isn't going to rain."

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Ken blinked. Zora was where she had been, tucked up on the sofa with her knees beneath her, printing letters in empty squares. But a few moments later, his wife broke her concentration. She got up and went to the door, opened it, and took one step outside. Then she came back in and closed the door. "The weatherman is crazy," she said. "It isn't going to rain."

Ken said, "That's incredible. A minute ago, I saw you do exactly that."

"What?"

"While you were still sitting on the sofa. I saw you at the door, saying what you just said about rain. Then you got up and did it."

"It happens."

"I saw the future."

"You had an episode of déjà vu. It's not unusual. Like a crossed wire in your brain. What you're seeing or hearing gets fed through a memory circuit, so it feels like a memory."

"This was different," Ken insisted. "I saw it happen. Then there was a pause. Then it happened."

Zora observed her husband's once-handsome face. It was not that the accident had left him looking horrible. But his eyelids now hung heavy. And one corner of his mouth drooped. The face that had caught her attention six years ago across the mall now looked stupid. Ken Rose still had all his marbles. But he looked as if he needed his address pinned to his jacket.

"Are you cracking up?" Zora asked.

"I'm all right."

"That would be all I need. For you to go batty on me."

Weeks went by before there was another episode. This time, Ken was alone. Zora was around the corner at the Alpha Beta market, working a shift at the checkout aisles. Her job five days a week brought in all the money. Before the accident, Ken earned his share driving a taxi for Beverly Hills Cab. He could no longer drive, his reflexes were slow. He had been speeding on wet pavement when he hit a light pole.

The Roses were now managing an apartment building. They paid zero rent, and the duties keeping the area tidy and handling minor maintenance jobs were within Ken's capabilities.

Zora knew the owner, Al McGee, from the market. He lived in a big new building halfway up the Hollywood Hills. McGee always

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checked out at Zora's machine. They had a low-key flirtation going. When his previous building manager quit, he offered the job to the sharp young cashier with the calculating eyes. He accepted the husband sight unseen.

"Give it a chance," Zora had said when Ken was expressing negative feelings on first hearing about the apartment job. Then she added, "What else can you do?"

He had no choice. The taxi career was over. On interviews for minimum-wage jobs, his damaged face made a poor impression. Zora's advice to him was, "Thank your lucky stars for Al McGee. I don't know where we'd be without Al."

There was one other source of money in an emergency. Ken could go and see his parents in Arcadia. But he hated to do that. His mother annoyed him by tucking a folded twenty-dollar bill into his shirt pocket even when he didn't ask for anything. His father was retired from his job behind a betting window at Santa Anita racetrack.

Unlike many other track employees, Ken's father never gambled. He referred to the people lined up at his window as "the fools and their money."

Ken had no real quarrel with his parents. They were harmless, though boring. He could not admit to Zora what he really wanted. This was for the old folks to pass on so that he could inherit the property. Then he would be secure.

It was a Tuesday morning, the sky was clear. Ken spent a couple of hours sweeping leaves, picking up papers, policing the property. He liked this part of the job. You could see the results of your work.

At noon, he stowed rake and broom in the closet at the end of the garage beneath the building. Then he went inside, showered, and changed into fresh clothes. There was an individual chicken pie in the freezer. He popped it into the oven, then poured a tumbler of red wine and sat down to read the morning paper. He was hungry. It was nice to sip wine and smell the pie getting hot.

The pain between the eyes came rolling in. He waited for the spasm to pass. It did, and he experienced a focusing of his awareness. He opened his eyes and saw through the front window a cat emerging from beneath shrubbery by the steps. It launched itself into the air, going for a sparrow that had been pecking seeds.

The bird was gone in a flutter, leaving the cat to strut off its anger. Ken recognized the cat as an orange cowboy who lived in a

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house across the street. It sometimes came around and moaned in the night.

But now the animal was gone, the pavement clear. Ken's heart began to pound. He peered at the shrubbery and saw the tips of the cat's paws, in hiding. A sparrow fluttered down onto the pavement and began to peck. The cat crept forward, then pounced. The bird took off, the cat lashed its tail and walked away.

Zora came in at the end of her shift. Ken described the episode with cat and bird. Then he said, "This is not déjà vu. I am observing an event a short while before it happens. Time is like a river. Everything that happens is bound to happen. We aren't able to see upstream before things get to us. But now I can. I have this glimpse of the river a minute or so before it arrives here. It's the future, Zora! Then it comes by me a second time, as the present."

"Well good for you, Ken." She kicked off her work shoes and fell onto the couch. "It's the immediate past that has me beat. I could use a beer."

He went to the kitchen and brought back bottle and glass. She waited as he poured the beer, then took it from him. He knelt on the carpet beside her. "I've figured out how to use this," Ken said. "Suppose we were in Vegas, watching a roulette wheel. I'd see the wheel spin and the ball drop into the winning number. Then we're back to the present. I place a big bet on that number. The wheel spins, the number comes up, we take it to the bank!"

The beer tasted good. Her husband, for a change, was not boring. Zora smoothed his hair across his forehead so it covered most of the scar. He would never again look like the guy who approached her as she was leaving the candy shop at the mall. Her friend Nellie saw what was happening that day and tactfully withdrew. What would Nellie say now if she saw Ken? "Who's that sleepy guy?"

"Even if you can do this," Zora conceded, "how can you control it? It only happens once in a while, right? And you can't predict when."

"Yes I can. Both times I've been drinking red wine on an empty stomach. A few minutes later, it happens." He drew her closer for a kiss. She turned her head and took it on the cheek. "Let's go to Vegas. I know I can make this work."

"Okay, let's take a couple of days off." Zora reached for the telephone. "I'll call and clear it with Al."

Al McGee drove them to the airport so they could leave Zora's car at the building and not pay for parking at LAX. "Not many owners

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would do this for their manager," he teased as they took their bags from the trunk.

"Not many owners have managers as nice as we are," Zora said.

"You don't have to walk us to our flight." Ken took hold of both bags.

Al McGee was a tall, rangy, suntanned millionaire with pale eyes and shiny teeth. He hugged Zora and swung her in a circle, as if the action would justify their touching bodies. When they tottered to a standstill, the landlord said, "Why don't you dump this loser and come live with me?" Then he put on an expression of mock-disappointment and let her slip from his grasp. This went to show that it was all a game.

But all three of them knew the old man had a serious craving for Zora Rose. And if ever the future were to reveal itself fully, Ken would hate the sight of certain events that were coming down the river.

The flight to Nevada took only an hour. There it was below, an island of fun and games surrounded by deadly sand. The plane landed, the passengers rode the shuttle to the bright lights. Ken and Zora took a taxi to Fremont Street. They found a room at the Union Plaza, stowed their stuff, and then hurried down to the main floor. Here were the machines, the dealers, the free drinks, and a girl singing country on a tiny stage.

"I'm starving," Zora said. She spotted the entrance to a dining room advertising roast beef dinners.

"You eat," Ken told her. "To make it work, I need red wine on an empty stomach."

Zora studied her husband. He had not looked her full in the face for quite a while. He was not depressed. But there was a hardness in his expression that she had not seen before.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm getting ready to win. So you won't be married to a loser."

"Is that what this is? Al was kidding."

"Hey, Al can kid all he likes. I'm about to get serious."

Zora went into the restaurant and Ken peeled off to a bar. He paid for a large glass of dry red. He took a sip, then drifted over to the wheel.

Not many people were playing at this hour. It made no difference to Ken. He gave a hundred dollars to the girl and took ten chips. He chucked them in one hand and sipped wine, watching the croupier spin the wheel. A lady was playing black and even. She won.

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Then she lost. She lost again. She bought more chips.

The wine on Ken's empty stomach was having an effect. He felt in control. He was like an actor with an award-winning part to play, facing a new audience. He drank more wine.

This time, he felt the flash coming. His heartbeat increased and his mouth went dry. He braced himself and stared at the wheel. The croupier was waiting for players to place their bets. He endured the familiar pain, the stabbing thrust between the eyes. Then he saw the wheel spinning, slowing to a stop, the tiny ball bouncing, catching, bouncing loose again, then resting and riding to a stop in number thirty-seven.

The flash ended. "Here we go," the croupier said. He spun the wheel and put the ball in play. "Place your bets, ladies and gents."

Ken reached forward and set all ten chips on number thirty-seven. He had never in his life bet a hundred dollars at one time.

The spin looked familiar. Every carom of the ball was as he recalled it from moments ago. The ball was bouncing, catching, bouncing loose again, then resting and riding to a stop on . . . number thirty-seven!

The payoff was thirty-five-to-one! Ken collected chips worth three thousand five hundred dollars. He stuffed them into his pockets and moved to the bar.

Zora joined him when he was on his second beer, having finished with the wine. "What's with you? Lose your nerve?"

He took a fistful of chips from his pocket and set them on the bar. He opened another pocket to show her more. "Let's hear it for Super Ken," he said.

"It worked?"

"One spin. Three grand plus."

She leaned back to frown at him, her eyes narrowed. Then she got off the stool and said, "Come on. Let's hit 'em while you're hot."

"You still don't understand. I had the flash. I saw the spin before it happened."

"You got lucky, Ken. But have it your way. Let's do it again."

"It won't work that way." He stood up, pushing money to the bartender. "I'm hungry now. I think I'll try the roast beef."

It would not work on the following afternoon. Ken had not slept well. He dreamed he was trying to cash a winning ticket at his father's window at Santa Anita. The old man tore the ticket to confetti. "You're a fool, son," he said. Then he grabbed the pari-

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mutuel machine by both hands and swung it around until its feet left the floor. "We're going to the chapel, honey," he sang, "And we're gonna get married!"

The wine tasted sour. Ken's empty stomach rebelled. He had to eat something. Afterwards, he bought a couple of rolls of quarters and fed the slots.

Zora came downstairs from sleeping late. She found her husband wandering around with a plastic tub of coins in his hand and a weary expression on his face.

"What happened?"

"It won't work today."

"You look like you just got the test results back." When he did not respond, she said, "Cheer the hell up. Going on vacation with you is like having a root canal."

That evening, he decided to try another casino. Zora came back from a bank of telephones. She said, "I spoke to Al."

"You called him?"

"I had to tell him when we'd be flying in so he can meet the plane. He doesn't have your psychic powers."

They postponed eating so that Ken could get hungry. They walked up one side of Fremont and down the other. The doors were open at Binion's. They could hear the clatter of a wheel. They went inside and Ken ordered his glass of red wine and a whisky sour for his wife. They moved to the roulette table where Ken stood and stared, sipping wine.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"More like it."

The flash came quickly. She was carrying the money. "Buy a hundred dollars," he told her. Not much was happening at the table. But Ken saw the wheel spinning, saw the ball bouncing, saw it catch and skip free and catch again and hold. Then it was riding firmly in number twenty-eight until the wheel stopped.

"Here we go," the croupier intoned.

"Put the hundred on number twenty-eight," Ken murmured.

Zora placed the chips and the wheel began to turn. Ken watched her face as his glimpse of the future was played again in present time. Number twenty-eight came up. They were ahead another $3,500!

Turning in the chips at a cashier's counter, she shook her head. "I still think it's luck. You could do it again, but you won't."

"You just don't know what's going on."

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"Who does?" she said.

When they got home, Zora put the money in the bank. Ken wanted her to buy herself something but she said, "I worry about my future. I don't want to end up old and poor."

A new tenant was moving into the building. Al McGee came over to sign the lease and accept the certified check for first month's rent and security deposit. Everybody crowded around the table in the Roses' apartment, drinking coffee and being neighborly.

The formalities were concluded, the tenant had to be on his way. But he expressed a desire to see where his parking slot would be in the garage beneath the building. Ken volunteered to show him, and the two men left the apartment.

It took awhile because the newcomer's space was between the wall and a wide-bodied car. He asked whether he might switch with the occupant of a more convenient space. Ken said people tended to be jealous of their parking space so he could not promise anything.

When the tenant drove away, Ken hurried back to the apartment. He heard Zora's voice as he approached the door, which he had left slightly ajar. He hesitated, listening.

"Don't, Al," she murmured. "He'll notice if I'm mussed up."

"You are one sweet woman. Come back to my place."

"I can't."

"Tell him you got called in to work."

"He might walk around to the store."

"So he finds out. You're too good for that jerk. Leave him, Zora. Come with me. You'll never have to worry about a thing."

Ken jiggled the knob before opening the door. His wife and his boss were a few feet apart on the sofa. She was tucking in her blouse. "He wants to switch spaces."

"Forget it," Zora said. "He gets the space on the chart."

"I told him."

Al got to his feet. "Do you have to work today?" he said to Zora.

"Half a shift," she said. "I go in from four to eight."

"I think we have a good tenant there. Nice work, you guys."

When the landlord was gone, Ken said, "What's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"I heard you outside. You're going to his place."

Zora went into the bathroom and began brushing her teeth. Ken followed her, stood behind her as she bent over the sink. She rinsed her mouth and turned to face him. He took a step backwards in the

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small room. "You have to wake up, Ken," she said. "We need Al McGee. You and I can't pay rent. Can you work at a normal job?"

"Was he doing something to you?"

"What does it matter? You don't do anything."

Ken stormed out of the apartment. He reached Santa Monica Boulevard and headed east. There was a bar around the corner on La Brea. He went inside and perched on a stool in the scented dark.

He ordered a glass of the house red. The bartender served it in a goblet. Then he went back to talking with a woman two stools away. She was a neat young person with cropped mahogany hair framing a plump face. She must have been in her twenties.

Ken had almost finished his wine when he realized he had left home without having any supper. Would it happen here, with no money to be won? Like a crack opening in his skull, the pain came and flashed and went. He rocked back on the stool, gripping the rim of the bar with both hands.

A man came in and stood surveying the room. There was something in his right hand, pressed against the side of his trousers. It was a gun. The man was the outdoor type, weathered face, Marine haircut. The sleeves had been cut from his denim shirt to reveal thickly muscled arms and shoulders.

The man focused on the girl talking to the bartender. He walked purposefully in their direction. When he arrived behind her, he did not hesitate. He raised the gun, held the muzzle inches from the back of her head, and pulled the trigger. She was knocked forward across the bar. The bartender lunged backwards, his shirt spattered with blood.

The intruder, moving at the same steady pace, walked from the bar. Ken rubbed his eyes. He saw the girl laughing at something the bartender had said. The atmosphere was serene.

"Can I talk to you?" he said to her. "This is important. There isn't much time." The bartender moved away. "You are in danger. There's a guy coming in here. Looks like a soldier. He has a gun."

She took him seriously. "You know Dalton? When did you see him?"

"Come with me." He led her to a door with an Exit sign above it at the back of the room. They hurried out into an alleyway leading to the parking lot.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Ken Rose. I can explain but there's no time. This guy is going to shoot you in the head."

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"Are you a friend of his?"

"Listen!" Voices were raised inside the building. A man was demanding to know where Rachel had gone. The bartender was saying things to calm him down. Ken said, "I suggest you get out of here. Have you got a car?"

"It's in the lot." She concentrated on him for the first time. "You saved my life. I'm Rachel Hagerty."

"I'd like to see you again."

"How about here, same time next Monday night." When he looked dubious, she said, "Dalton Lee is not a fool. He'll be in hiding now for a while."

Ken saw her to her car. When she had driven away, he went back inside. The bartender said, "I'm glad you got her out of here."

"What happened?"

"This crazy guy used to work for her father. He got fired. And Rachel stopped seeing him. He's been stalking her. She got a restraining order, but those things don't always work."

Two days later, after an intense conversation with Al McGee, Zora made up her mind. Things were never going to get any better with Ken. He was a pathetic case, but she had her own future to consider. Al might decide to dump her sometime down the road. But her chances of controlling him were good. He was old and she looked young, so she could use that to keep him in line. Above all, he was rich. Whatever took place, she should walk away with a nest egg.

It only remained to break the news to Ken. They agreed to do that as a team, over dinner at Al's place. Late that afternoon, when she walked back to the apartment from the market, she found Ken watching yet another news program on the box. He would switch from channel to channel, soaking up the same headlines over and over, told by different talking heads. She wanted to throw her shoulderbag through the screen.

"We've been invited out for dinner!" she said.

"Where?" He was suspicious of her delight.

"Al's place."

"That's weird."

"Don't you want to dine on a penthouse patio under the stars?"

"He wants you, not me." Ken's mind was adrift, nudging thought after thought of Rachel Hagerty.

Zora was encouraged. Her husband's mellow response boded well for the announcement to take place later. They both dressed up for

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the first time in months. Before leaving, Zora ate some chocolate cookies and drank a large glass of milk. "You want some?"

"No, I want to be hungry. Who knows what slop I'll have to pretend to enjoy."

A taxi drove them to Al McGee's building, a seven-story structure of recent design. It was a black slab, gated and barred, with door buzzers and a uniformed guard packing heat.

Al greeted his guests in black slacks, an open-necked black shirt, and a white silk ascot tie. A giant Irish setter was sitting beside him, waiting for the word. The dog looked old and it was overweight. "This is Argo. Say hello to Ken and Zora, Argo."

The dog pranced forward, reared up, balanced a paw on either shoulder, and tried to lick Ken's face. Ken liked animals in their place. Argo took the hint and turned his affections on Zora.

"That's enough," McGee said. "Come here, you mutt." Argo ran to her master and rose like a heavyweight at the count of nine. McGee took hold of the front paws and they danced together, man and animal pirouetting through a doorway onto the penthouse patio.

"This is gorgeous," Zora said, admiring the table elegantly set for three. Some day soon, she would live here.

"How about a drink," Al said, dismissing Argo with a whack on the flank.

Zora took bourbon on the rocks because that's what her host was drinking. Ken asked for a glass of red wine. It was smoother and drier than what they served in bars.

McGee said, "Let's get business out of the way and then we can eat. Did you break it to him?"

"He has the idea."

"This is me you're talking about?" Ken said.

"You must have noticed how things are. Between me and Zora. She tells me you guys are not as close as you once were. There are no children to worry about. Listen, you can stay on in the apartment as long as you want, rent-free. Zora would be up here, of course."

The arrival of the pain between the eyes was subtle this time. Gradually, it intensified. Ken pressed fingertips into both sockets. The other two took this to be his reaction to the news. They waited for him to collect himself.

Ken opened his eyes. He saw Al McGee on his feet. Argo rose to lean on him, and they began dancing again. But this time, Al's foot struck Zora's shoulderbag where she had left it on the floor near the parapet. The strap encircled his ankle and he tripped, twisting to

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regain his balance, falling against the waist-high wall. The weight of the dog pushed him farther and, before anyone could move, he was over the edge. His scream as he fell lasted only a couple of seconds.

Ken blinked. The scene was as before. Al said to Zora, "Your glass is empty." He took it and got to his feet. Whimsically, he danced a ballroom turn away from the table. Argo saw his master's movement and came at a run. The dog rose up and put his paws on Al's shoulders. Laughing, Al continued the dance. Ken saw the shoulderbag on the floor, but said nothing. He watched as his host's shiny patent-leather loafer hooked the strap. In moments it was over—the stumble, the lurch, the slide across the parapet, the fall to the pavement seven floors below.

Zora was stunned. She seemed to be in shock. Ken got up and looked over the edge. The dog whimpered beside him. Ken went to the telephone and dialed 911. Waiting for the operator, he said, "I could have prevented that."

"What?"

"The red wine? The empty stomach? I had a flash. I saw the whole thing happen before it happened."

Zora looked at him with major hatred. "I can't go on living with you, Ken. You are crazy beyond belief."

For the next couple of days, Ken kept wondering if he was guilty of something. The police had logged McGee's death as an accident. Was there a crime known as accessory before the fact of accidental death? There was a risk now that their apartment-manager job might vanish. Whoever inherited Al's estate could decide to move in and manage the building.

Ken and Zora spent an afternoon in Arcadia visiting his parents. He told them the story of the landlord's fall. He mentioned the dance with Argo, but not his premonition. His father, who was losing it fast, said, "A man's best friend is his dog."

As they left the house that evening, his mother slipped a folded twenty into Ken's shirt pocket. "Buy yourself something," she whispered, glaring at Zora.

Driving home through Glendale, Zora said, "Spending time with your parents helps me understand why you're so weird."

"I love you too."

"Count your blessings."

"What for?"

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"If I thought you could have spoken up and saved Al's life, I'd throw you out onto the road and back over your broken body."

Ken was doing some serious thinking. It was odd to consider his wife a bereaved woman, but it was the truth. To abandon her in the state she was in might seem cruel. But it could also be the best thing for everybody. She talked about protecting her future. He could only do the same for himself.

"I'm going out for a walk," he said when they were home.

"There are dangerous people out there," she told him. "Take your time."

It was Monday evening. He had been thinking of Rachel Hagerty all day. He remembered her promise to see him at the place on La Brea. When he got there, she was on her accustomed seat at the bar. The mahogany hair shone, and a strand of pearls enhanced the cleft of the sheer black nylon blouse she wore.

"You made it," she said, turning to him with a magnificent smile.

"Couldn't wait." He slipped onto the next stool and then, risking it, kissed her on the cheek. "What happened to Dalton Lee?"

"He's vanished. The bar reported his coming in last week. I don't think we'll see him for a while."

She was a good listener. For the next hour, as he drank beer, Ken told her everything about himself. He described his ageing parents, his estrangement from his wife, the taxi accident that changed his face and did something to his brain so that he could occasionally see the immediate future. He ran through the vision of Lee invading the bar to commit murder.

"You've got this incredible talent," she said, accepting it without question. "And you saved my life with it."

When he told her about his big wins at the roulette table, her response was immediate. "Why don't we go to Vegas! Switch you on and make our fortune!"

"Let's do that."

"I mean right now. My car is out back. The tank is full." Her eyes sized him up. "Ever drive through the desert at night?"

Zora was not home. Ken left a message on the answering machine saying he was heading for Vegas with a friend. He joined Rachel in the parking lot where she was warming the engine of a white BMW. He climbed in beside her and belted up.

"Great wheels."

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"It's one of my father's cars. Dad owns Hagerty Security. That's where Dalton Lee came from. He did watchdog assignments until he started pursuing me. Then he got suspended for taking bribes and now he's in real trouble."

"I hope I can pass inspection."

"I told my father how you saved me. He thinks you're sensational."

They made a coffee stop near Victorville. Getting back on the road, neither of them noticed the black sedan that followed at a distance. It was the same car that had crept out of a laneway onto La Brea when they began the journey.

Later, Rachel said, "Are you hungry?"

"Getting there."

"When we arrive, let's feed you some red wine. Then we can hit a roulette wheel before we go to bed."

A silent mile went by with painted lines flashing beneath the car. Then Ken said, "You don't owe me anything."

"Who said I do?"

"I didn't always look like this."

"Will you cut it out?"

"When we get to the hotel, I want to stop at an automatic teller machine."

"The hotel is on me. My credit card bills go to Dad."

"I want to get five hundred out anyway."

"Men are so funny." She took a hand off the steering wheel and found his fists clenched in his lap. "Will you relax? It's not how you look or what you have. It's who you are."

Ken said, "I know that." Then he sat there in her father's car, knowing he looked bad and he didn't have enough.

The new Excalibur was the first hotel off the freeway. Lit up at night, its turrets resembled the closing titles on a Disney movie. The parking lot was not busy in the wee small hours of this Tuesday morning. Rachel wheeled the car into a slot close to the main entrance. The black sedan parked fifty feet away. Its lights went out.

"I need that ATM," Ken said. They were out of the car, approaching the main doors.

Somebody was coming from the parking lot, walking fast. It was Dalton Lee. He held the gun pointing straight up, inches from his cheek. Thin face, narrow eyes, oiled hair—the man looked like some piece of lethal equipment.

"Caught you this time," he said. He leveled the gun and took aim at Rachel.

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Ken ran forward without thinking. He heard Rachel scream, "Don't!" as he closed with Dalton Lee. Lee was frighteningly strong; it was like grabbing a bronze statue. All he could do was use both hands to force the gun off line. But with a forearm under Ken's jaw, Lee moved the weapon slowly back towards his assailant.

Behind the glass doors, a security guard in the lobby saw the struggle. Drawing his nightstick, he came outside on the double. The gun went off and the unarmed man went limp. He fell to his knees and sagged prone as the guard arrived behind Dalton Lee. The nightstick came around sharply, making contact above the ear. Lee sprawled face down, the gun skidded away.

Rachel was bending over her companion. Ken was bleeding from a wound on his forehead. The guard dragged Lee's arms behind his back and snapped on handcuffs. Then he used his radio to call for backup and an ambulance.

"You're good at your job," Rachel said.

"What about him?" the guard said. "I came up from behind. Your guy ran right at the gun."

The management of the hotel took note of the security guard's report. They were impressed. No casino wants the media coverage that accompanies a murder on their front steps. This customer prevented that from happening.

The clincher was when the security chief interviewed Rachel Hagerty. He had heard of Hagerty Security in Los Angeles. Her father's business made her one of the family. The chief told her to forget about hospital bills. All expenses for Ken Rose's treatment would be sent to the hotel.

Doctors performed plastic surgery to erase the scar where the bullet grazed his forehead. Then, knowing they had carte blanche, they corrected the drooping eyelids and the sagging mouth. Some time later, when the bandages came off, Ken looked in a mirror and saw his old handsome self.

Rachel was impressed. She was driving him from the hospital back to their free room at the Excalibur. "If your wife sees you, she's going to want you back."

"When you called and told her I'd been wounded," Ken reminded her, "did she rush to see me?"

"No. She said you'd done enough to wreck her life. She has other fish to fry, was the way she put it."

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For two days, Ken and Rachel had all their meals delivered to the room. On the third day, he said it was time. The roulette wheel had been allowed to run free long enough. So Ken skipped breakfast and lunch and went to the bar alone in the early afternoon to drink red wine. In order not to be a distraction, Rachel went for a drive.

They met an hour later. "Nothing happens," he said. "I had three glasses of wine. Usually it works with one. I don't feel the same."

"Dalton's bullet must have done something to your head. I'm sorry, Ken. Because of me, you've lost the magic."

"Because of you," he said, "I no longer have to see the future. Here and now suits me fine."

Zora was dozing in the living room. She had consumed two beers on an empty stomach. A completed crossword lay beside her on the sofa. She should have gone to Vegas to see Ken in the hospital. How did he manage to land a rich woman? She herself was in limbo. She had her rent-free apartment, but there was no Al McGee to lift her out of her low-pay job.

A key turned in the lock. The door opened and Ken came into the room. He was accompanied by a pert young woman with mahogany hair. His face looked different; the dopey expression was gone.

"Did we wake you up? I came to get a few things. This is Rachel."

"Take what you like. As long as I didn't pay for it."

"I see what you mean," Rachel murmured as Ken went into the bedroom.

Zora got up. She approached Rachel. "I suppose he's been telling you I'm the villain."

"We have more important things than you to talk about." Rachel turned away.

Zora picked up the lead slab they used as a doorstop. She drew it back, taking aim at the girl's head. Suddenly, Ken was behind her, seizing her arm, swinging her so she was flying back onto the sofa. Her head struck the wooden arm, stunning her for a moment.

She opened her eyes. The apartment was empty. A key turned in the lock and Ken entered the room. He was accompanied by a pert young woman with mahogany hair. "Did we wake you up? I came to get a few things. This is Rachel."

Zora did not question what was happening. It was useful to be given a preview of events so you could alter your behavior. In this case, all she had to do was pick up the lead weight a little sooner, and swing it a bit harder. ●

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JOHN F. SUTER

As well as being an author of short mystery fiction, John Suter is a dedicated scholar of the form. He has provided this magazine with many excellent suggestions for reprint, so when he told us he had the "ultimate armchair detective story," we took notice. . . .

INTERRUPTED SENTENCE

by JOHN F. SUTER

They were about to begin fastening the straps of the last chair he would ever sit in when Warren Johnson shifted his gaze to the window where the warden stood. "Hold on," he said. "I have something important to tell you."

The warden opened the door of the execution chamber. "Hold up a minute," he said to the guards. To Johnson, he said, "You've had all your lasts. Quit stalling. We'll go ahead, even if you talk yourself blue in the face."

Johnson looked at him calmly. In spite of the pallor of five years since being sentenced, his was a memorable face, with deep-set black eyes under jet brows, high cheekbones, thin nose and lips, sharp chin.

"I know I might get only a few more minutes," he answered, "but I have no illusions about the ending. I want to give you something."

"Which is—?" demanded Warden Peters.

"The solution to the Bedford woman's murder."

The warden stared at him, no expression on his rough-cut face. Inwardly, he was alarmed. Could the slippery bastard be serious? Would his story, if he was allowed to tell it, get his sentence changed

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to life imprisonment? Peters was not bloodthirsty, but this one deserved what was coming.

"You have inside information?"

Johnson shook his head.

"This last week concentrated my mind, as the saying has it. I gave most of my attention to other things, chiefly the Bedford case. I know the answer, or I think I do. I'll be glad to give my version, then you can go ahead."

Six persons who were to be witnesses to the electrocution were watching through windows from another room overlooking the chamber. One of them, a short, rumpled reporter representing a pool for wire services and local papers, chuckled.

"The twisty SOB! Keeps 'em chasing their tails right up to the second they throw the switch. I'm gonna miss him."

A slightly taller, solidly built woman in her mid-forties standing next to him remarked, "I don't know as much about this Warren Johnson as I should. I have heard that he's a serial killer, and he's staved off execution for nearly five years. Have I missed something?"

The reporter looked at her. "You must not have been around much. Travel a lot?"

"Hardly at all," she answered in a matter-of-fact tone. "I'm head nurse at General Hospital."

He nodded. "Too busy. That figures. In those five years—"

He stopped abruptly. The warden was addressing the man in the chair, who seemed to have relaxed, his hands resting on its arms.

"I have no obligation to listen, Johnson. By law, I ought to go ahead and ignore your antics."

"Suit yourself," Johnson said. "I'm just offering a final good turn. Not that I'm in the least guilty of what they say I am. For all you know, they might never crack the Bedford case."

Peters shuddered inside but let nothing show. He did not know what to think about the case. It was at a dead end, and he was glad that he was not investigating it. He glanced at the witnesses behind their window.

They were all watching intently, especially the reporter.

A wicked grin crossed the newsman's face. He pointed to Johnson and clapped his other hand over his mouth. Then he pointed to the warden and drew the edge of his hand across his throat.

Peters got the message. If he refused to delay execution, to let Johnson reveal possibly vital information about a crime—

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"All right," he said. "So long as you realize this won't stop what we started. Commence talking."

"Well, now," said the condemned man, "hadn't we better get this down on paper or tape where it can be studied?"

"I'll have our tape recorder brought—"

"Better yet," Johnson went on, "why not call in the officer heading the investigation? The local cops covered it, and it should still be an open file."

The warden looked at the witnesses again. He imagined that they could see the sweat running down his spine, hear his heart pounding.

The reporter—what was his name? Stonehill!—was staring hard at him. He nodded at the warden.

"All right. I'll call police headquarters."

He stepped back inside his observation room. The prison doctor was seated where he could watch the proceedings before going to pronounce the final verdict. He was a small, thin man with a full head of gray hair and an eternal poker face.

"Doc," said the warden, "do me a favor. Get out of here to the nearest outside phone and call the governor. Fill him in on what's goin' on. Assure him that we'll go ahead and fry this bastard as soon as this farce is over."

The doctor got up. "Got you by the shorts, doesn't he? But it'll end up only one way. Okay."

The warden was on the phone. When an alto voice answered, "Police Department," he said, "This is Warden Peters, state penitentiary. Connect me with the chief . . . "

In the witness room, everyone had settled down in their chairs, talking. The nurse, whose name was Florence Taylor, gestured toward the man in the electric chair.

"This Warren Johnson—I can't help having heard of him because of all the delays he's caused—getting people on his side and other maneuvers. Still, not much, really. Am I right that he's supposed to be very intelligent?"

Stonehill nodded. "Some people claim it's just highly developed cunning. However, he's been one of those people who never get a college degree, but keep taking course after course at community colleges."

"But he's supposed to be a serial killer, isn't he?"

"Credited with six. All women. All badly cut up. Always left a taunting note. Cheap paper, childish writing. But done in fountain-pen ink."

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She looked surprised. "Fountain-pen ink? Why is that unusual? Everybody has a pen."

Stonehill grinned. "Most of those pens are ballpoints. The ink is like printing ink, no water. Fountain-pen ink is water-based. That was one thing that nailed him. He had a fountain pen. The ink was the same as in the notes."

"But they had to suspect him first."

"Somebody noticed that the victims were all community college attendees, although Johnson was never in any of their classes. A policewoman was set up as bait on a wild hunch, and it worked.

"Of course, he denies it," he said, as an afterthought. "Claims it was mistaken identity—she wanted to make the collar too much—won't admit she could be wrong."

"Is there a chance that he's innocent?"

"Not likely. The pen? Useful, but not conclusive. But he did have a ring that had belonged to number six."

She changed the subject. "The Bedford case. I'm not too familiar—"

Stonehill smiled. "Maybe you know it as the Robin Hood murder."

There was no time for more discussion. Warden Peters had entered the execution chamber, carrying a folding chair. A guard followed with a card table.

The guard opened the table and set it in front of Johnson. The warden placed the chair behind it.

He spoke to the condemned man. "The police are sending over Lieutenant Gates, the officer in charge of investigating the Bedford murder. Don't try to pry privileged information. Don't make any speeches. Don't intrude your own predicament in any way. If you do, it comes to a dead halt, and we go ahead with your execution. Is that understood?"

Johnson's voice was a pleasant baritone. "I'm perfectly willing to abide by your rules."

"Then all we have to do is wait for Lieutenant Gates." Peters turned and left the chamber.

Peters was not a nervous man. He had endured nearly every problem that a prison could produce. His apparent unemotional bearing was even now threatening to drive a wedge between himself and his wife. This time, however, he was searching his mind for a hint of what was behind Johnson's stunt. Maybe his own fiber was beginning to deteriorate, maybe he was on the first step down.

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He went into the hall, that place of hard surfaces, where no comfort ever made itself known. Two men were walking rapidly toward him, a guard and a blocky man who had to be the detective.

He stepped forward when they reached him. "Lieutenant Gates? Warden Peters."

"Sir. I'm told you've got a problem." They shook hands briefly.

"No problem. Just a delay. You might get something out of this. I wouldn't count on it."

Gates scanned him with gray eyes that gave nothing away. "We'll see."

The warden took Gates into the execution chamber. "Johnson, this is Lieutenant Gates, who's in charge of the Bedford case. He's here to listen to you. Lieutenant, you've heard of this man."

"My pleasure," Johnson said.

Gates acknowledged him with a nod, but said nothing. He put a tape recorder on the table, then sat down in the chair. He pushed the switch to start the recorder, dictated the date, time of day, and his name. "This will be a discussion with one Warren Johnson about the murder of Sarah Bedford," he finished, then laid a notepad and pen by his right hand. He then pointed a large forefinger at Johnson. "Now, talk."

Johnson leaned forward. Earlier, his expression seemed to mock; now, it was grave and truth-seeking.

"I must make it clear at once, Lieutenant, that I have no part in the Bedford crime. None of what I have to say came to me by way of the prison grapevine. My speculations came from what I have read in the newspapers, plus some analogies derived from things I've noticed in recent years. I can't ask you to tell me information known to the police but not to the public. Please correct my mistakes, if possible. Comment on my accuracy, if advisable.

"All right. The Bedford family. Husband, Arnold. Wife, Sarah. Both in their mid-thirties. Two children, a boy, Arthur, ten, and a girl, Lynne, eight. A typical middle-class family until eighteen months ago.

"Arnold Bedford had been the manager of a better-class fast-food house, part of a small chain. It had been very successful, partly because it was situated only one block from one of the two local high schools. The enrollment of both schools fell, restaurant maintenance rose, and both schools merged—at the other location. Obviously, business at the restaurant declined, and none of Bedford's market-

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ing skills could bring it back. The chain closed that location, and Arnold was out of a job. He is still unemployed.

"Of course, they were living comfortably until then, so Bedford tried to find work. There was nothing for him in the restaurant business. The competition is so ferocious that all have to fight to keep open. I don't know what he tried to do to maintain his household. The papers have never said."

"Telephone solicitation—telephone surveys—you name it. Nothin' that pays much," Gates said. "A few investments. Marginal."

"Just so," Johnson went on. "Then, as is sometimes the case, the roles in the household reversed. Sarah had some skills as a legal secretary, and she was hardworking. She was also attractive and intelligent. She had no difficulty in becoming the breadwinner.

"She was a very good-looking woman. I'm sure everybody's seen her picture in the paper."

"Well, her husband's no wimp, himself," Gates commented. "She had the money, and he didn't. Or isn't that important?"

"Important? Oh, yes, because it underlines what often happens in marriages. Sarah had the power, and it's rumored that she began looking elsewhere for Arnold's substitute."

"Rumored," Gates remarked.

"Without direct information, I can only speculate that Sarah left Arnold as sitter for the children more and more frequently," Johnson said.

"There's some evidence of that, yes."

"Then, on the night of March twenty-ninth, roughly three months ago, Sarah left home, ostensibly to attend a meeting on ways to sharpen her skills. She drove the family car, a blue Volvo. Arnold was at home with the children, seeing that they did their homework.

"When midnight came, and Sarah had not returned, Arnold became worried. If Sarah was truly being unfaithful, she had not shoved it in his face, so far. Still, he called only one or two of her associates who were supposed to be at the meeting. They told him that she had been there, but had left when the session was over at ten-thirty.

"This made Arnold worry. She was really flaunting an involvement, or something had happened. He decided to call the police.

"However, they called him first.

"At a little after one A.M., on a tip from a person who had driven through the parking lot of a third-rate motel to turn around, the police discovered the Volvo in the back end of that lot. The door on

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the driver's side was open. Beside it, slumped against the car, was the bloody body of Sarah Bedford, her throat pierced by an arrow."

"The Robin Hood angle," Stonehill remarked to Florence.

"The case has many unresolved angles," Johnson went on. "What was Sarah Bedford doing there? Had she a rendezvous at the motel, or had she been forced to drive there for some reason? Arnold Bedford, the usual prime suspect, seemed unlikely to have killed her. He was sitting with his children. True, he could have waited until they seemed to be asleep, sneaked out, arrived at Sarah's rendezvous, and killed her. But his boy Arthur had trouble going to sleep, and he says that his father didn't leave the house. As for another man, none has been fingered yet. And the weapon: why shoot her with an arrow? Because it was silent? So much for information from the press."

He stopped, waited in vain for comment, then resumed.

"Now, my own speculation. As for alibis, it's now well known that guilty individuals can hire hit persons to commit crimes for them. If I were a police detective, I would have checked the Bedford bank account, or accounts. Were any unusual sums of money withdrawn? Was Sarah insured in Arnold's favor? This, I admit, would require lots of patience in Arnold. Insurance companies are reluctant to pay without clear answers to their questions."

Gates remained silent. He had made a few notes on his pad.

Stonehill whispered to Florence, "Watch Johnson. Until now, he's been looking the cop in the eye. Now he's glued to the notes Gates is making."

"Of course," Johnson went on, "payment doesn't have to be in money. But transfer of property—car, expensive entertainment appliances, whatever—is just as noticeable.

"Or it could be barter. Services. Does Arnold have a talent or ability the perpetrator lacks? A valuable talent, capable of generating a service worth lots of money? I don't know. I doubt that a restaurant manager has it, but maybe the police know things they're not telling."

"He's a very smooth talker, I must admit," Florence whispered.

"That's why he's stayed out of that chair so long," Stonehill murmured.

"Anything to volunteer, Lieutenant?" Johnson asked. "No? Then I'll get on with it. What have we? Bedford has a good alibi. If he hired it done, how did he arrange payment? If Sarah had a lover, who is he?

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"The weapon. It's evident that no bow or other arrows were found at Bedford's property. The papers would surely have headlined WEAPON FOUND AT BEDFORD HOUSE. Rather curious. When I was a boy, my father made me a bow and turned some dowel rods into arrows. You would have thought that young Arthur . . . I suppose it's all video games.

"Did Arnold Bedford belong to an archery group? No evidence reported. Have the police scanned such groups for names they could connect to Sarah Bedford? I don't know. I hope they have.

"But let's take a look at that arrow. Who says it was shot from a bow, eh? Suppose she was *stabbed* with it?"

Gates lifted his head and stared at Johnson.

"That's right, Lieutenant. Stabbed. As with a knife or dagger. You're thinking, *how stupid can this jerk get?* I'm saying, *not stupid at all.* Yes, I know the wooden shaft could snap.

"Consider two things. First, Sarah Bedford was struck—or stabbed—in the throat, a very soft area that would have little resistance, even to a hand-held arrow. Second, an arrow's rigidity could be enhanced either by tightly wound cord or by wrapping with several turns of Velcro-type fabric. Either could be removed quickly after the blow was struck.

"I must say that such use of an arrow is not impossible. Four years ago, an effort was made at this prison to expand the recreation program. An archery range was set up. It was popular until one convict used an arrow in this very fashion to attack another. He inflicted a very serious wound, although he missed the neck and the thing glanced off a shoulder. They dismantled the archery project immediately, of course."

Air hissed involuntarily from between Gates's teeth. He wrote furiously.

"Bull's-eye!" Stonehill exclaimed. "He gave 'em something to think about that time."

Warden Peters's jaw dropped. He had hoped that this incident would never be known outside the prison walls. Some mistakes could never be forgotten. He had hoped to curb his impatience about the execution, but he found the sweat starting again.

Gates addressed Johnson. "You were here when this happened, weren't you? You have direct knowledge?"

"I was," Johnson answered. "I knew the guy who was wounded."

"So," said Gates, writing hard, stabbing at the paper.

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"So," Johnson remarked, "you now realize that you'll have to check all of the records of whoever was released after the incident, won't you? Everybody knew about it."

"Christ on the mountain, yes!" the detective spat.

"I can save you the trouble," Johnson said quietly.

The verbal buzzing that began when he finished discussing the arrow halted abruptly, leaving an aching quiet.

"You mean you can finger somebody?" demanded Gates.

"I think so."

"Who?"

"Of course, you'll have to fill in details of this person's relationship with Sarah Bedford, whether any other arrows are still in his possession, and other details."

"Yeah, yeah, we'll go into all of that."

"Because I won't be around to consult."

"If you're any kind of a direct link, you will. We'll get you a postponement until everything's over and done with."

The warden stepped into the execution chamber. "You can't make such a promise, Lieutenant. I am obligated to see that the law is carried out, and carried out it will be as soon as this man's statement is finished."

"In my opinion, it would be murdering a witness in a homicide case, and I'm not about to let that happen."

Gates stood up, drew his gun, and put it to the warden's temple. "Somebody out there get on the phone and tell the governor about this," he called.

"I'll do that," the doctor volunteered.

"Good," Gates nodded to Johnson. "Now, finish what you were about to say."

"A woman who regularly visits whoever's on Condemned Row came to me yesterday to see if I wanted any last favors granted. When I finished, she told me she knew who'd been seeing Sarah Bedford. This man had a decoration on the wall in his home consisting of a bow with two arrows crossed beneath it. One of the arrows is gone, and the other is now mounted horizontally under the bow.

"On the night of the murder, the woman's husband came in late. The next morning, she found his shirt in the laundry with bloodstains on the right cuff. Since he had another identical shirt, she hid the stained one. It's available.

"She also offered a guess as to why he killed Sarah."

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"Why was that?"

"She feels that Sarah wanted him to marry her, but he refused."

"And that's it?"

"Not quite. She wanted to include her kids in the deal. He might have taken her, but not the kids. When she kept after him, he decided to end the whole thing."

"Why should this woman tell *you?*"

"She never said, but she knew what I'm like. She must have guessed what I'd do."

"Who is this person?"

"The warden's wife."

As the uproar commenced, Stonehill raced for the door.

The guards stared at Gates and the warden, whose hands were now cuffed behind him. One of them pointed to Johnson.

"What about him?"

"I'll stay where I am for a while," the convict said. "This isn't as uncomfortable as I thought it was when I sat down."

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Martin Edwards resides in Cheshire, England, but the venue of his Harry Devlin stories is Liverpool and its environs, where his solicitor sleuth occasionally comes up against some mean streets and unsavory opponents. Not so in his latest tale, in which Devlin and his associate visit what seems to be a genteel retirement home . . .

WHEN I'M DEAD AND GONE

by MARTIN EDWARDS

"I hate to think that he might die on such a beautiful day," said Sylvia Reid.

Sun was streaming through the office window, but dismay clouded her pleasant features. She had been qualified as a solicitor for exactly one month, not long enough to learn to take each client's misfortunes in her stride before moving on to the next buff folder and the next troubling tale.

Death, Harry Devlin wanted to tell her, hurt as much in the depth of the darkest night as at the height of an Indian summer. Too often in the past he had come face-to-face with death—the death of those he had loved as well as of those he had good cause to loathe—and he knew that whether sudden or slow, its constant companions were anger, pain, and despair.

But there was work to be done and all he said was: "I hate to think that he might die before we've managed to write out his will."

She frowned. "No need to worry. Lucy has already typed up the engrossment. Would you like to look it over?"

Harry loosened his tie while he thought about it. Making the most of the good weather, his partner Jim Crusoe had taken his wife and children off to Blackpool, leaving Sylvia in charge of the firm's non-contentious department for the first time since her admission. In truth, she had understood more about the law of property, wills, and probate three months into her traineeship than Harry ever would, but he could not escape the uncomfortable feeling that she still

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expected him to offer words of wisdom about the legal small print, as well as about how to cope with clients who were despondent, defeated, or about to die.

"If you don't mind," he said awkwardly.

Sylvia handed him the crisp foolscap sheets and studied his face for a reaction. She was a serious girl and so anxious to do well in her career that Harry marvelled at her decision to stay on with them rather than moving to a rival firm which could offer more training, prestige, and money than Crusoe and Devlin ever could.

He scanned the will paragraph by paragraph. Leonard Justinian (for Heaven's sake!) Routley had not indulged in complex testamentary dispositions, but Harry did not want her to think he was simply going through the motions of glancing at her work. And in any event, since Routley was apparently a solicitor, he would expect the will to be word perfect.

"Pass me *Ibbotson,* please."

She slid the massive bulk of *Ibbotson on Inheritance* in front of him. It was the nineteenth edition of a monograph which had first appeared when Victoria was in nappies; within the profession, it was better known as *Everything Your Clients Always Wanted to Know About Wills, But Couldn't Afford to Ask.*

Words of warning were uttered on every page. *The draftsman of a will is enjoined to manifest the highest standards of professional care . . . he must regard the desires of the testator as paramount . . . although before death a misapprehension will be susceptible to correction, thereafter, even where all the beneficiaries are sui juris, ambiguous provisions may need to be the subject of a ruling from the court.* The orotund phrasing did not conceal the menace of the message. Harry knew that to err might be human, but it would also expose the firm to a negligence writ. In Jim's absence, they couldn't run the slightest risk of making a mistake.

"I was surprised that Mr. Routley hadn't already made a will," Sylvia said as he leafed through the precedents with what he hoped was a knowledgeable air. "After all, solicitors know better than anyone else about the problems that can arise on an intestacy. It seems slapdash."

Harry couldn't help blushing. "Tell you the truth, I haven't made one myself."

She goggled at him. "Why ever not? Superstition?"

"Simply never got round to it."

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He might have added, but didn't, that he had no one close enough to leave all his things to. Besides, who would thank him for a roomful of dog-eared murder mystery paperbacks and scratched sixties LPs which had never been translated to compact disc? And who exactly would mourn him, a man without a wife or family, when he was dead and gone?

Wanting to change the subject, he reached back in his memory for a scrap of legal trivia. "Anyway, lawyers writing their own wills are notoriously inept. Wasn't it Sergeant Maynard who decided to benefit the profession with a will that raised most of the problems of inheritance law that had perplexed him during his lifetime?"

Sylvia laughed. "At least Mr. Routley's instructions were easy to follow. He wrote them out for the matron at the old people's home to read to me over the phone."

"Why the urgency? What's the matter with him?"

"Heart trouble, the matron said, complicated by diabetes. Apparently he had a bad do last night. The doctor examined him this morning and says he could go at any time. With the late summer holiday coming up, it's a long weekend, and the poor old man started to get worried that he might not have a chance to put his affairs in order by the time Tuesday came around."

Harry glanced at a passage in the textbook cautioning of the dangers associated with intellectual incapacity. He had a nightmarish vision of sitting for hour after hour at Routley's bedside, trying to take advantage of a fleeting lucid interval. "You're sure he's still compos mentis?"

"I did press her about that, especially as we have never acted for him in the past. But she said the doctor was quite definite. And when I go over there later this afternoon to have Mr. Routley sign the will, I'll talk it through with him, to make sure I'm happy that he knows what he's doing. In the meantime, his wishes seem clear enough."

"I see this man he refers to as his good friend, Parbold, pretty well scoops the pool. You know what they say: where there's a will, there's a relative. Has Routley no family at all?"

"The matron says not. He's a bachelor, and when I asked if, nevertheless, he might have any children, she sounded shocked and said that with a gentleman of that calibre, it was absolutely out of the question."

"Stranger things have happened, but never mind. So there's no one else who might have a possible claim on the estate?"

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"She's positive from what he has said to her that there are no brothers or sisters, and she isn't aware of any cousins, however many times removed, let alone nephews or nieces. So that leaves the way clear for Walter Parbold."

"A bachelor's old boyfriend, perhaps?"

"Maybe, though the matron was so brisk and businesslike, I didn't dare to ask."

"How much is the estate worth?"

"Too little to attract inheritance tax. There are bank and building society accounts, National Savings, and a few privatisation shares. But not more than sixty thousand in total. A tidy sum, but hardly a fortune."

"The prices some of these homes charge," said Harry, "he probably went in there a millionaire. So—at least there's no problem about covering the specific bequests?"

"None at all. You can see there are several small pecuniary legacies to other residents at the home. He intends to leave his gold watch to his doctor, a local G.P. whose name is Berkeley. All rather trivial in money terms, but I suppose the little things matter a great deal when you come towards the end."

"Parbold's the sole executor, I notice."

"Yes, no scope for appointing Jim and yourself, I'm afraid."

Unspoken was the acknowledgement that a solicitor did not make money out of drawing a will. Profit came with the work on the probate. Routley had no doubt decided that his affairs were easy enough to administer. If Parbold was intelligent and capable, there might be little need to involve a solicitor. And as a lawyer himself, Routley would know better than most what a hole legal fees could make in any estate. On the other hand, if Parbold turned out to be elderly or inefficient, the odds were that he would soon find the burden of executorship too much to cope with alone. The price of professional help was often worth paying. Harry sensed there might still be an opportunity for further business.

"Did you find out whether Parbold is willing to act?"

"Yes, the matron was sure about that. Parbold often pops in to see his pal and he was happy to help."

"What if Parbold dies before Routley?"

Sylvia flushed. "I—I didn't ask. I assumed that, since Mr. Routley is in such a poor state, the question simply wouldn't arise. Do you disagree?"

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"Even a sick man may linger on for much longer than anyone would expect," Harry pointed out, "while a perfectly healthy person can be run over by a bus at any time—especially in view of the way they are driven round the streets of Liverpool."

"Shall I give the matron a ring?"

"Not a bad idea."

She checked the number in the book, but a couple of minutes spent listening to the answering tone convinced them both that the Mersey Haven Rest Home was woefully understaffed. Perhaps all the caregivers were sitting outside, soaking up the sun.

"What shall we do?" Sylvia could not conceal her anxiety. In Jim's absence, Routley's will had offered a chance for her to shine, and now she was afraid that if the unexpected happened and the residuary gift to Parbold lapsed, it would be her fault.

Harry closed *Ibbotson* with a decisive smack. "It's too lovely to stay inside any longer. I don't have any more appointments this afternoon, and I wouldn't mind making an early start to the weekend by running over to Otterspool."

Crestfallen, Sylvia said, "So you're taking over the file?"

"Not at all. I can scarcely tell a codicil from a cold supper. But if you're dealing with a retired solicitor, you may find it useful to have me come along. If any last-minute redrafting is necessary, we can retype the will at the home. I presume they must have a typewriter, if not a word processor."

"And when the poor old man's ready to sign," she said, brightening, "we can act as witnesses, if need be. As a matter of fact, the matron did enquire about that."

Harry got to his feet. He had become interested in this new client, even experienced a certain fellow feeling for him. Maybe when they met, Harry would see in Routley his own reflection in forty years' time, a retired solicitor with no wife or kids, just a bit of money in the bank, a few mementoes to leave to acquaintances, and a host of memories that would die as soon as he did. But none of this could he explain to the earnest young woman who saw the forthcoming meeting as so much valuable experience.

"Let's move, then," he said. "I wouldn't like the old bugger to breathe his last while we're queuing at the traffic lights by Jericho Lane."

In the years when Gladstone reckoned that peace in Eastern Europe and an answer to the Irish Question were just around the corner,

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the yellow brick villa which now housed the Mersey Haven Rest Home must have belonged to one of his wealthiest fellow Liverpudlians. At that time, the owner could scarcely have imagined the day would dawn when a development of poky semis would encroach upon the wooded grounds of his home and when on the river which it overlooked not a single oceangoing ship could be seen. Now the building seemed an anachronism. So long had passed since a single family lived here in splendour. Its gentility had faded, and it had become simply somewhere people came to live in peace and quiet before they finally died.

As Harry swung his MG into the drive, he slowed to read the Gothic lettering on a garish yellow signboard.

"High-class accommodation for senior citizens," recited Sylvia, "with nursing care provided by qualified staff, supervised by the resident proprietress and matron in charge, Mrs. A. Katsikas." She paused and added, "I suppose Mr. Routley's lucky he can afford it."

"Not so lucky at the moment," said Harry, and they both fell silent, contemplating the prospect of advanced years, infirmity, and the black abyss beyond.

He parked on hardstanding at the side of the home, and they headed on foot for the main entrance, past a sun lounge tacked onto the east wing by the kind of builder who would happily have stuck a sauna on the side of the Anglican cathedral. As he walked by the windows, Harry was conscious that he was being scrutinised by an old woman with watery eyes; he saw another half-dozen ancients baking under the glass, fast asleep with their heads lolling on shrunken chests.

At close quarters the building, like its residents, was showing its age. The brickwork needed repointing, and paint was peeling from the woodwork. The front door yielded to Harry's touch and he led the way inside. A small desk in the hall bearing a notice marked ENQUIRIES was untenanted; Harry rang the bell.

At once a wizened face belonging to the owner of the watery eyes poked around the side of the door from the hall to the conservatory. "Have you any idea who I am?" she demanded.

Harry gave a helpless smile and was forced to admit that he did not.

"I can tell you—in the strictest confidence, mind—that I am Princess Coralie of Monte Carlo," the old lady said. "Am I right in thinking I have the pleasure of addressing none other than His Royal Highness, Crown Prince Rupert of Eastern Bohemia?"

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Harry had been called many things in his life, but he'd never before had the misfortune to be mistaken for royalty. Aware that Sylvia was controlling her mirth with the utmost difficulty, he was saved from the need to reply by the approach of a plump, comfortable-looking woman in a blue uniform. At the sight of her, an expression of truculent dignity crossed the wrinkled face.

"Hush! Not a word!" the old lady hissed. "No one must know our secret."

Harry winked at her and she vanished as swiftly as she had appeared.

"I see you've met our princess," said the plump woman with a smile. "You're not a relative, are you, love?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't like to admit it, but no blue blood flows through my veins. My name's Harry Devlin and I'm a solicitor." He paused, trying to reconcile the woman's broad Lancashire vowels with the exotic name on the signboard outside. "You're not Mrs. Katsikas, by any chance?"

"Guilty," she said, noting his puzzled look with amusement. "They call me Ada, a good Red Rose name, but my ex-husband was Greek. I met him on a package tour of Corfu. Should have realised that holiday romances don't last much longer than the average sun tan."

She gave a laugh and shook him by the hand, her ringless fingers pressing into his flesh. "You're younger than most solicitors I ever came across. To say nothing of your lady friend. Are lawyers like policemen, getting younger all the time?"

Daunted by her roguish manner, Harry said hastily, "This is my colleague Sylvia Reid. You spoke to her earlier today on behalf of Mr. Routley. I thought it would be helpful if we both came. Firstly, in case there's a need to make any last-minute changes to the will. Secondly, to provide a couple of independent witnesses. I gather you thought that might be necessary."

The matron became more serious. "Yes, given that we are very short-staffed this afternoon. The holiday weekend, you know. People like to make it into a decent break. But our guests still need to be looked after, of course, and there is some urgency in this case, in view of poor Mr. Routley's condition."

"I understand he may not survive the weekend?"

"That's right. Dr. Berkeley was pessimistic this morning. Frankly, something could happen at any moment. I think Mr. Routley senses that himself, which is why I needed to call on your services without delay. I hope the instructions were clear?"

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"Fine, fine. Is it possible for me to see my client now?"

"Yes, I was with him in his room when your car pulled up outside. He had a sleep after lunch, but he woke up half an hour ago."

"His mind is still in good shape, I understand?" said Harry.

"Oh yes, there's no trace of dementia, and the drugs he has been taking make him drowsy at times, but don't have any damaging effect on the brain. I know he has been thinking for a while about making his will. It preyed on his mind that he hadn't done so before. But at least it's not a hasty decision. He's very much at peace with himself."

Harry had never been able to grasp the idea of coming to terms with death. His own end would, he felt sure, fill him with terror as it approached. For him, life was something to cling to and fight for, whatever the cost. He and Sylvia followed Ada Katsikas upstairs in silence.

The matron directed them to a room above the front door. Knocking softly, she said, "Leonard, it's Ada. The solicitor is here at last." Turning back to them, she whispered, "I'll just make sure he's presentable, then I'll call you in."

A couple of minutes later she reappeared and gave an encouraging nod. "Yes, I've just made him comfy. He's frail, of course, but able to talk quite clearly. I don't suppose you want me to sit in, but if you do need me for any reason, please don't hesitate to press the button by the side of his bed."

Leonard Routley lay propped up in his bed. He was solidly built with a good head of grey hair; but for the chalky whiteness of his cheeks, Harry would not have guessed he was close to death.

"Mr. Routley, I'm Harry Devlin and this is Sylvia Reid, who works with me. Thanks for instructing us. I'm sorry to hear you're not so grand."

The old man waved away the words of sympathy with a flap of his hand. In a wheezing but audible voice, he said, "I know the state I'm in, Mr. Devlin. I'm not long for this world, and all I want is to get things settled."

"You're a fellow solicitor, I gather?"

"For my sins," he grunted. "Have you got the will?"

"Here it is. Do you need me to take you through it?"

"I don't think there's any need. If you'll pass my reading glasses, please."

He indicated a pair of spectacles lying on his bedside chest alongside a faded black and white photograph. Harry glanced at the

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blurred image: dark-haired young fellow, tall and erect in mortarboard and gown. The passage of perhaps fifty years had made it hard to recognise the breathless old man from the record of his younger days.

"Your degree ceremony?" Harry asked as he passed the spectacles.

"A long time ago," mumbled Routley as he began to study the will, tracing his finger along each line as he sought to absorb its sense.

"Leonard *Justinian* Routley," said Harry. "Is that right?"

"Afraid so. Damn fool name, never come across it anywhere else. Never understood why my parents ever landed me with it."

"A family connection with the law, perhaps?"

"God knows. Justin would have been bad enough. What else do we have? Ah yes, small gifts to three of the nicest old crocks here, Raymond, Lavinia, and Charlotte, that's right. And to the good doctor, as well. He's done his best for me. With the rest to Parbold, excellent."

Harry was troubled by something. Absently, he asked, "He's an old friend of yours?"

"Feel as if I've known him all my life," said Routley. "Though truth to tell, we only met after I moved into this place. First-rate chap, never let you down. Deserves it, I can assure you."

"I'm sure."

"Well, everything seems all right. Thank Heaven that's done at last. I know I shouldn't have left it so long."

"We never take the advice we love to give our clients, do we?" said Harry. "There's just one thing I'd like to ask."

"Go on."

"Don't you think we ought to cover the eventuality that Mr. Parbold might predecease you?"

The old man stared at him. "There's no question of that. Walter's as fit as a fiddle. I'm a sick man. Berkeley hasn't beaten about the bush. He gives me a few days at best. Maybe only a few hours, for all he and I know."

"I appreciate that, Mr. Routley, but accidents can happen when we least expect them. If by some stroke of fate, Mr. Parbold were the first to die, you'll know as well as anyone the problems that can arise. No executor, no residuary legatee. Messy. I gather you don't have any family."

"None whatsoever."

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"So applying the intestacy rules to your residue wouldn't achieve anything. The Crown would take the bulk of your estate."

For a moment Routley bowed his head. He seemed to be dismayed that the point had not occurred to him. "Perhaps you're right. I suppose I'm not thinking straight. What do you suggest?"

"Is there anyone else you would like to benefit if the worst came to worst and Mr. Parbold did not survive you?"

"I suppose . . ." said Routley slowly, "the doctor would be as good a man as any."

"You have his full name?"

"Giles Alexander Berkeley," said Sylvia unexpectedly. "He happens to be my and my mother's G.P. I've always been rather in awe of him, but there's no doubt he has an excellent reputation. You couldn't be in better hands, Mr. Routley."

"I realise that. All the same, I don't want any delay."

"No need for any," she said. "We can make the necessary alterations in a matter of a few minutes if Mrs. Katsikas will let us use her typewriter."

Harry pressed the bedside bell and the matron came running in. "No problems, I hope?"

"A minor alteration, that's all."

The plump woman gave her patient a startled look. "I hope I didn't make a mistake in writing down your instructions, Leonard. We went through them so painstakingly. I can't believe it's a good idea to chop and change at the last minute."

"It's nothing, Ada. A technicality, that's all."

Harry explained the point and asked if Sylvia could type the amendments on the spot.

"Of course, of course. I'm only relieved it's something minor that can easily be attended to. And Dr. Berkeley's a good man, even if the point is—shall we say, academic? I know how much Leonard has set his heart on finalising the will this afternoon. Would you like to come this way, Miss Reid?"

"Where did you practise?" Harry asked Routley when they were alone.

"Oh, I was with a small outfit in Greater London," said Routley. "You wouldn't have heard of them. And besides, it all seems a long time ago."

"So you're not a local man?"

"I was raised in Wigan, but we moved down South when I was in my teens. My widowed sister stayed up here and when I retired I

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decided to move in with her. She died eighteen months ago and it was then that I decided to come to the Mersey Haven."

"Have you been happy here?"

"First-class place. The matron talks a lot, but she's marvellous. And this is where I met Walter Parbold. Listen, would you mind drawing the curtains? The sun is so strong, it's making me feel faint."

"Was he in residence when you first arrived?" asked Harry as he moved to the window, but when he turned again, Routley's eyes had closed. He leaned over the bed and was glad to hear steady breathing from its sleepy occupant.

A couple of minutes later, the matron ushered Sylvia back in. "All done and dusted, Mr. Devlin."

Harry glanced at the retyped will before passing it to Routley, whose eyes had just begun to open.

"Please make sure you're happy with it before I ask you to sign."

The old man read through his final dispositions before giving a satisfied nod.

"It reflects my wishes. You've done a good job."

"Sylvia here did all the work."

The young woman coloured. "It was very straightforward."

"At least there were no family complications," said Harry, "no hotchpot."

Routley shook his head. "A will's an important document. I wouldn't want mine to be a hotchpotch."

Harry took a fountain pen out of his pocket and watched carefully as his client scratched out his signature with a shaky hand. Then he and Sylvia signed their names underneath and added their descriptions and addresses.

"Do you wish me to keep the original in our archives?"

"Thank you, but no. It will be safe enough here."

"In that case, if there is a photocopier downstairs, perhaps I could take a copy for my office records?"

"With pleasure," said Ada Katsikas, beaming. "Now, I rather fancy you're tired after all this excitement, Leonard. Not used to visitors, are you? I'll show Mr. Devlin and Miss Reid out, and I'll bring the will back to you in a few minutes."

"Goodbye," said Harry. "I'm always glad to meet a professional colleague. Perhaps I'll see you again sometime."

The old man gave a weak smile. "I'm afraid I don't think I'll manage that, Mr. Devlin. But thank you both for your prompt help in my hour of need."

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When they were back in the car, Sylvia said, "Are you all right?"

"Any reason why I shouldn't be?"

"It's just that you went rather quiet while we were in the rest home and something still seems to be gnawing at you."

He thought for a moment. "Let's say I always feel uneasy in the presence of the dying."

After dropping her off at the station, he did not drive away at once. Rather, he sat in the car park for twenty minutes, letting his thoughts roam. He hadn't told Sylvia the whole truth, but the things that tantalised him were trivial, and he knew it might be unwise to make too much of them. The sensible course was simply to go home and forget about Leonard Routley's will until the time came to send in the bill. But he had never been good about taking the sensible courses in life.

Doubts were lurking in his mind; he could not rid himself of them. Past experience had taught him that he would have no peace until he found answers to the questions he found puzzling. Although, if he were mistaken, he faced at best embarrassment, at worst a charge of professional misconduct, he knew that he had to act—and without delay. He could not live with any other choice.

This time he parked half a mile away from the Mersey Haven Rest Home and made his way there on foot. On the earlier visit he had noticed that a footpath and cycle track had been carved between the housing development and the grounds of the home, and he followed its curving course for a couple of hundred yards until he reached a stretch out of sight of both the houses and pedestrians on the main road.

Conveniently, the new featheredge fence which separated the rest home from the path had already been broken down and there were signs that someone had trampled under the horse chestnut trees which fringed the grounds. For once Harry found himself sending up a silent prayer of thanks for juvenile delinquency. He slid through the gap and, with head bowed to avoid the low looping branches, hurried around the perimeter. Soon he realised he had arrived at a point directly behind the central part of the building and perhaps fifty yards distant from it. On this occasion he had no intention of going in by the front entrance; he must check covertly to find out whether his guess was wide of the mark. He could see dustbins and a gleaming Range Rover, which belonged, he guessed,

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to Mrs. Katsikas. But what caught his eye was a window on the ground floor which someone had left invitingly open.

There was nothing for it but to hope that no one would see him as he broke cover. He dashed to the window, stopping up short of the brick beside it. Panting, he thought ruefully back to his footballing days, when he'd always had the ability to race up from midfield and lose his marker before meeting a cross pulled back from the wing. Nowadays, he would struggle to keep up with the average referee.

No matter. He had reached his destination, and when he stole a quick glance through the window, his luck held. The room was deserted. A moment later he was inside.

Fussy ornaments and knickknacks covered every inch of shelf space and there was a faint whiff of perfume in the air. Even before he heard a light approaching tread in the corridor outside, he realised he'd entered a woman's bedroom.

He could see nowhere to hide. No convenient cupboard or empty wardrobe. He wasn't even able to squeeze under the bed: it was a drawer divan. Holding his breath, he hoped the footsteps would pass by the door and disappear into the distance.

Instead, they paused for a second and then the door swung open.

"Crown Prince Rupert! This is a surprise!"

Harry's heart sank. He would almost rather have been confronted by Ada Katsikas wielding a rolling pin than Princess Coralie of Monte Carlo in coquettish mood.

"Your Royal Highness," he said, edging round the bed as he tried desperately to remember a chunk of Anthony Hope dialogue, "I must apologise most humbly for this unwarranted intrusion."

"Rupert, my dear, you don't have to say sorry to little *me!*"

"You see, I had hoped to leave my card, suggesting that perhaps we could have a longer conversation later this evening."

The watery eyes were bright with excitement as he moved closer to the door. "What a marvellous idea!"

He had almost made it. "Shall we say nine tonight—in the sun lounge?"

"Splendid!"

"Until then, let us say nothing!" He placed his finger to his lips and felt like crying with relief when she nodded and waved a delicate farewell as he peered outside and, seeing the coast was clear, made good his escape.

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The corridor led him straight back to the main hall. No one was about. He took the stairs two at a time and within seconds he was standing outside Leonard Routley's door. He listened for a moment, then put his head round and looked inside.

The room was deserted.

He saw that the bed had been remade. There were now half a dozen photographs crammed on top of the bedside table, including the degree picture that Harry had seen on his previous visit. The rest showed a man at different points in his life. There were two studio portraits, one that seemed to have been taken at Ascot, and another where he was shaking hands with a youthful-looking Duke of Edinburgh. The rest were less blurred than the degree photo.

He heard movement and voices outside. No question, they were coming closer. For the second time in five minutes he found himself looking round desperately for a hiding place. Once again he was out of luck.

You would never have made it as an Anthony Hope hero, after all, he muttered to himself.

He had no choice but to brazen it out. Standing by the bed, his arms folded, he watched and waited as the door swung slowly open.

Ada Katsikas was wheeling a frail old man in a chair. For all his pallor, Harry recognised him at once as the man in the photographs. Quite different from the tall chap who had his hand on the matron's shoulder and who, when his now florid cheeks had been coated in white makeup an hour earlier, had been introduced as Leonard Routley.

The matron and her companion came to a sudden halt, their faces drenched in horror at the sight of Harry. Only the old man in the chair, his head lolling to one side, was unmoved.

"Next time you impersonate a lawyer," said Harry to the man who was not Leonard Routley, "you ought to mug up more on the jargon we use. As we say in our profession, *res ipsa loquitur,* Mr. Walter Parbold."

"Do you think they actually had murder in mind?" asked Sylvia the following Tuesday. They were sitting in Jim Crusoe's office, with the rain drumming against the windowpanes. The weather had broken in the early hours of Saturday morning and storms had raged the whole weekend long in the best traditions of the British bank holiday.

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"Not at all. Both father and daughter were thieves, not killers. Parbold has seen the inside of Walton Jail and Strangeways over the years. Dud cheques, selling dodgy cars, that sort of thing. His daughter doesn't have a record, but the police found she left one or two of the homes where she'd worked as a nurse with scant ceremony after patients' money and belongings started to go missing. Presumably Ada's purchase of the Mersey Haven was funded by their ill-gotten gains."

"But they couldn't afford the upkeep?" asked Jim.

"Which was why they had to keep their eyes out for a likely mark. Leonard Routley fitted the bill perfectly, because he had plenty of cash, but no relatives who might turn up and start asking awkward questions once he left his estate to a chap he hardly knew."

"What made you suspect?" asked Sylvia.

"I imagine that his father was a lawyer, too, as his middle name was that of a great Roman jurist."

"Justinian? I've never heard of him."

"A sign of the educational times. But I would have expected old Routley to know something about the author of *The Institutes*. And then he seemed to confuse hotchpot with a hotchpotch."

"I wouldn't even have thought you knew anything about hotchpot," Jim grunted.

"I'm fine on footnote knowledge, but don't press me for a definition."

His partner reached for *Ibbotson* and turned to the glossary. *"Hotchpot; a throwing-in to a common lot of property for strict equality of division which requires that advancements to a child be made up to the estate by way of contribution or accounting."*

"Ah yes," said Harry, "it was on the tip of my tongue."

"I see that once you realised you were dealing with a fake, you could guess the rest," said Sylvia. "Ada had cleared out her staff for the afternoon, having arranged for a respectable doctor to confirm that the real Routley was of sound mind . . ."

"He died yesterday, poor old chap. In Ada's room, the police found the will he actually made twenty-five years ago. He had no one he cared much about, so he left everything to a worthy charity. The Distressed Solicitors Association."

"I keep thinking they ought to make me a grant," said Jim.

". . . but why," Sylvia continued firmly, "were you so sure that illness hadn't simply caused Routley to forget things that he should have known?"

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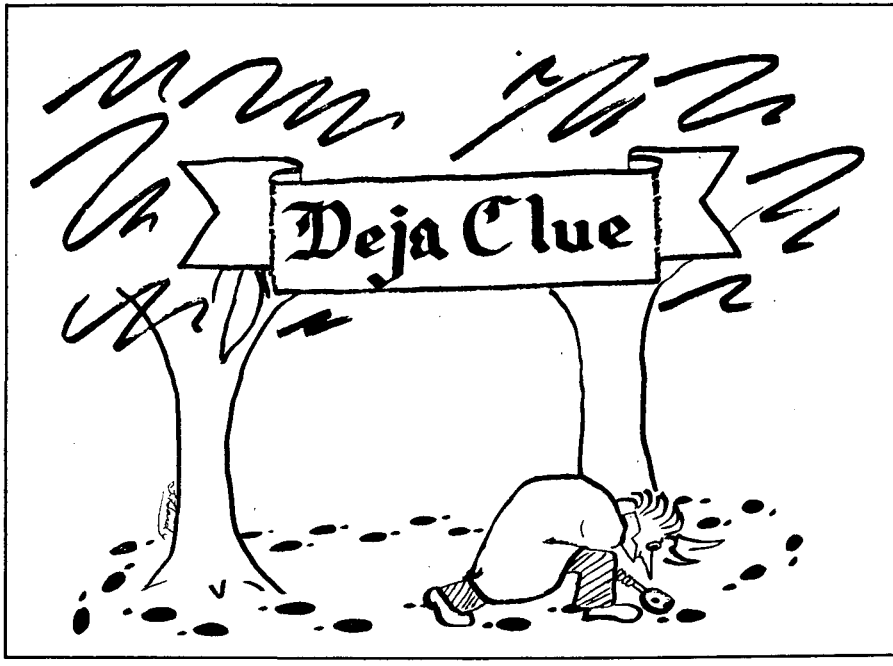
Harry rubbed his chin. "I've had more than my share of dealing with death. It has an awful atmosphere all of its own. Horrible, yet unmistakable. But when we walked into that bedroom, my guts didn't churn. I felt fine."

Outside they heard another rumble of thunder and Harry couldn't help thinking again about the real Leonard Routley and wondering, now that the sad old man was dead, where his soul had gone.



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Like one of the characters in his story, Georgian E. L. Wyrick makes his living as a school counselor. This first published fiction will be followed up later this year by Mr. Wyrick's first novel, A Strange and Bitter Crop *(St. Martin's Press). . . .*

CRUEL CHOICES

by E. L. WYRICK

Kevin Spurlock unsnapped the button under the belt on his plaid polyester pants and blew air through puffed cheeks. "Gettin' too darned fat."

Lucas Anderson ignored Spurlock's self-evident revelation and leaned against the century-old water oak. He stroked his beaked nose slowly as he stared at the body that hung over the rotting porch railing of the dilapidated shack. Flashing blue and red lights from the police cars and the ambulance cut through the swirling October mist that fell from the black sky, creating a hue that washed out the color of the blood dripping from the victim. Lucas was grateful for that.

Spurlock scratched his navel. "Ninth murder just like this one in two years. It's *got* to be the Dixie Mafia. I guarantee it."

Lucas slid down the oak until his bony knees nearly reached his chin. "I'm telling you, Kevin, never, *ever,* say the words 'Dixie Mafia' to me again. I've told you a million times, it doesn't exist."

Spurlock hitched up his pants and said, "You got any better ideas?"

Lucas shook his head.

"Well, then, how about B. R. Matthews?"

Lucas ran his hands through his prematurely thinning hair. "The problem is, why?"

"Why? Who knows?" Spurlock pointed to the dead man. "Maybe these guys welshed or something."

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"They're not all guys." Two of the nine victims had been women.

Spurlock disregarded the correction. "You know as well as I do that B. R.'s into it all—gambling, auto theft, 'shine, drugs." Spurlock snapped his pants together again. "Even if we can't prove it, you know it's true."

Lucas nodded. When it became apparent the killings were not isolated domestic disputes, the first person he thought of was B. R. Matthews. But two years of investigation had uncovered no connections between Matthews and the victims. None.

And the murders were coming closer together. After the last shooting, Lucas had decided he had to try something to unsettle the guy who was doing this and at least slow him down. Lucas announced that he was close to an arrest, which was an absolute lie. Now it was obvious that the tactic had failed.

The rail-thin detective looked away when the EMTs pulled the body off the railing and placed it on a pallet. He'd seen eight other faces that had been blown away. Looking at another one wouldn't help. He stood and tried unsuccessfully to rub the tension out of his tight shoulders. "I'm heading home."

Spurlock dug in his navel again. "Me too. Gonna go see B. R. Matthews in the mornin'."

Lucas opened the door of his 1972 Toyota Carina. He blinked the mist out of his eyes and said to Spurlock, "You do that."

The man on the radio was saying something about a missile attack on Iraq, but Lucas wasn't listening. Instead he squinted in confusion at the face of his clock radio that sat next to his bed. The red numbers indicated it was five o'clock, which was the same time the radio always turned itself on, but this morning was different. Most mornings, Lucas was already awake, lying there thinking, when the radio clicked and the news began. He had arrived home just after two and last remembered the red numbers turning to three-fourteen. His foggy mind tried to figure out the amount of sleep it had gotten, but it was having a hard time handling the process of subtraction.

Lucas lifted his hand to slap at the rarely used snooze button, then lowered it again. The teenaged voice from Teal County's only radio station had begun reporting the local news, and the latest murder was the lead story. The detective lifted his pillow against the fiberboard wall of his fourteen-foot-wide trailer and listened to the scant details provided.

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Now Lucas was wide awake. There was no doubt that the people at the radio station knew only a little less than he did. Lucas also knew that if last night's shooting followed the pattern of the other eight murders, he might never know much more than he knew now. And he knew that his lack of knowledge would make it impossible to stay in bed, so he didn't.

By five-twenty, the coffee was ready and the *Patsboro Herald* had arrived. As he did every morning, summer or winter, Lucas sat on the makeshift porch he'd fashioned in front of the trailer, drank coffee, and read the paper. The headline screamed that another murder had occurred. Lucas was amazed. The body had been discovered shortly after nine the previous night and the *Herald* never reacted so quickly. In fact, only one of the other murders had rated a headline. That was the one from McCarty's Creek.

Lucas, who rarely used obscenities, said, "Damn," and threw the paper down in disgust. That's when he saw it. A note taped next to his door. He tore it down and read, "I'll be leaving Fluffy with you tonight, if you don't mind. I'm going to Hartwell to see Aunt Ruth and will be back the day after tomorrow." It was signed, "Mama."

"Damn," Lucas said again, "The Gnat." He hated that dog. His mama's dog was a ball of white fur that stood about six inches tall and never stopped jumping and yapping. He couldn't stand gnat dogs. He picked up the paper again and began reading. Even thinking about eight, now nine, unsolved murders was better than thinking about babysitting Fluffy.

By the time he finished reading the paper, and after going into the trailer for two more cups of coffee, rays from the rising sun were falling on the rolling hills that fronted the trailer. The clouds from the night before had moved to the east, leaving behind crisp, clean, clear air. Lucas slouched in his metal chair and stared at the scenery before him.

Something moved. Nothing ever moved on those hills at this time of the morning except an occasional deer, and what he saw was not a deer, but it was gone before he could see what it was.

Lucas leaned back in his cracked leather chair and gazed at the blackboard before him. This one was really black. He had procured it when the Teal County School District modernized and went from black to green. That had happened in 1990.

The victims' names were listed on the board: Jim Landry, Sherry Drake, Roscoe Flinn, Terry Stark, Elvis Coulter, Martha Williams,

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Jason Barrett, Ted Black. But that was only eight.

Lucas walked around his desk and added Arthur Peterson, the victim from the night before.

During the past two years, the names had been put on the board and erased over and over as Lucas searched for connections. They'd been reordered based on arrest records, employers, occupations, hobbies, acquaintances—even places of birth. Nothing had come together.

As Lucas sat again, Tammi Randall walked into the room and sat in the chair next to Lucas's desk. She crossed her legs carelessly. Lucas knew there was no message in that. He knew Tammi didn't think of him in that way. For that, he was sorry.

"Number nine," Tammi said.

"Yes."

The two sat for a moment staring at the names on the board. Lucas broke the silence. "Got a client upstairs?" He nodded toward the ceiling. The Teal County Jail was one story above Lucas's office.

"Wayne Myers." Tammi recrossed her legs. She was an attorney for the Teal County Legal-Aid Society. While she and Lucas were usually on opposite sides in court, they had become friends when they were both involved with uncovering Jink Jarvis's smuggling ring.

Lucas had arrested Wayne Myers. "That case is open and shut."

"I know. I've read your reports." Tammi rested her chin on a fist, unknowingly accentuating her sensuous lips. "Still have to be sure he's treated fairly."

Lucas nodded.

"It's my job. Even when I know he's guilty as grits."

Lucas nodded again, then moved his eyes reluctantly to the blackboard. Tammi followed his gaze.

"I keep thinking about the kids," Tammi said.

"The kids?"

"Yeah. I read obituaries. Got the habit from my mother." She nodded at the board. "Every one of those people had kids."

Lucas knew that, of course, but he hadn't focused on it. He immediately worked through the odds. Nine murdered victims and all have children. Nothing special, he decided. Most folks had kids.

Except him.

"That is a shame," Lucas said.

Tammi rose from her chair. "Well, time to go visit Wayne. Just can't wait." She departed, leaving the scent of Shalimar behind.

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Lucas slid down in his chair, breathed deeply, then shook himself. He picked up the preliminary report from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation field men and found what he expected. It was just like the others. The victim was shot in the face by a .223-caliber round. The ballistics expert who was at the scene guessed that the range was more than a hundred yards. Because rifles, unlike some handguns, don't leave signature markings on the bullet, the type of weapon would probably remain unknown. For reasons unknown to Lucas, he guessed a Ruger Mini 14, but it could just as easily be an M-16.

There were no other clues. Not a footprint, nor spent shell casings. No discarded cigarettes for DNA tests, no fiber evidence. No witnesses.

Nothing.

He stared at the names on the blackboard. Connections, he thought. "Kids," he said aloud. He sat straight and turned to his filing cabinet. He pulled out eight thick folders that contained his notes from the first eight murders. He put them on top of the thin folder from last night's shooting and pushed them across his desk toward the blackboard.

Lucas erased the victims names, then put them up again horizontally. He consulted the folders and wrote the names of the children on the board underneath each of their murdered parents' names. When he finished, twenty-two children had been listed. He leaned on the edge of his desk and sighed. More than half of the brothers and sisters had different last names. So many broken families.

This is stupid, he thought. Without any physical evidence, finding connections among the victims was all he could hope for. But after two years of investigation, he'd found none. Were their kids connected? He didn't know what to think.

Juvenile was downstairs in the basement. Lucas called and asked for Mack Bryson. If anybody could tell him something about the kids in the county, it would be Mack.

Bryson arrived five minutes later. "Seen the paper?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Made the headlines again. First time since the colonel got it at McCarty's Creek. I guess eight poor folk equals one McCarty's Creek."

Eight of the nine murders had occurred in impoverished settings like the one from the night before—two from Elysian Fields, three from Stoney Bottom, one from Rat Row, and two from other isolated

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points of poverty. Two were women and seven were men. The fourth murder, the one from McCarty's Creek, was different.

McCarty's Creek was a new development of expensive homes designed to attract people from Atlanta to Teal County's pastoral setting. Lucas was surprised when the GBI's ballistics report came back positive. The shell was fired from the same gun as the others. He had figured that one was an anomaly.

"I could do without headlines," Lucas said as he moved to the blackboard. "Quick question." He pointed to the children's names. "You recognize any of these?"

Mack answered immediately. "One big time. The rest, no."

"Who's big time?"

"Coulter. Bad news. Drugs mostly, but that got him involved in other stuff."

"Like what?"

"I heard satanic."

Lucas shifted his eyes toward the board. A moment passed. "Nobody else?"

"Nope. What's the deal? Anything I should know?"

"Nah," Lucas said as he sat in his chair again.

Mack was at the door. "I'd like to know about Coulter. Word is he's improved a bunch since his daddy got it. I'd like to know if he's backsliding. Wouldn't surprise me."

"Let you know." As soon as *I* know something, Lucas thought with a sense of hopelessness.

The Teal County High School secretary sat behind a counter that was surrounded by students. Lucas squeezed between them to capture the harried woman's attention.

"I'd like to talk to you privately," Lucas said.

The secretary pushed her cat-eye glasses up her nose. "Gladly." She motioned for Lucas to follow her to a room filled with file cabinets.

Lucas nodded toward the crowded counter. "What's going on?"

"Pep rally this afternoon. Happens every time we have one. They want to check out. I have to talk to their parents before they go."

"Why don't they want to go to the pep rally?"

"No school spirit," she said in disgust.

Lucas closed the door so he could hear. "I'm Detective Anderson. I need to talk to somebody about Joe Coulter."

The secretary curled her lips. "Devil worshiper."

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"I heard he's changed."

"Those kind never change. Once Satan's got 'em, it's too late."

"Who can I talk to?"

She pushed her glasses up again. "Probably his counselor. Coulter's a 'C' so it'll be Dan Rooker. Dr. Rooker, that is. He's got A through F."

"A through F?"

"Last names." The secretary opened the door and pointed the way. She didn't want to talk about Joe Coulter.

Dan Rooker leaned back in his chair. He was wearing a well-worn maroon sweater vest, maroon and silver striped tie, and brown Hush Puppies. His full beard was flecked with gray.

Lucas put his elbows on his knees and leaned forward. "I'm Detective Anderson."

"Yes. I've read about you in the *Herald*. You've become the proverbial legend in your own time."

Lucas buried his embarrassment and said, "I want to know something about Joe Coulter."

"He in trouble?"

"No. Not at all. I'm investigating his father's murder."

"Stepfather," Rooker corrected.

Lucas furrowed his brow. "His name was Coulter, just like Joe's."

"Mr. Coulter had an affair with his brother's wife. He ended up marrying her."

"So, he was Joe's stepfather and . . . "

" . . . uncle."

The two sat in silence for a moment. "Anyway, like I said, I'm investigating the murder."

Rooker cupped his face in his right hand. "Probably the best thing that ever happened to Joe."

"His stepfather being murdered?"

"Proof is in the pudding. Joe's doing much better."

"Tell me about him."

Rooker pulled on his beard. "He's a good kid."

"The juvenile authorities have a different opinion."

"Look, Detective. Joe comes out of a bad situation. Terrible background. His stepfather was rotten. That's why Joe did all those things."

"What'd his stepfather do to Joe?"

Dr. Rooker didn't respond.

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"What did he do?" Lucas repeated.

"Have you heard of a code of ethics?" Rooker asked.

This time Lucas didn't respond.

"I am a counselor." Rooker waved his arm. "What goes on in here is private."

"We're talking murder."

"Get a court order," Rooker said curtly.

That was the end of the conversation. Lucas walked out of the counselor's office and stood in the hall. He hadn't gotten Jink Jarvis without perseverance. If the counselor wouldn't help, or couldn't, maybe the principal would.

The principal did talk. He made it clear he wanted to get rid of the kid. "Panthers' spots don't change," he said.

"Panthers are black," Lucas said. "They don't have spots."

"Same thing." He called Coulter from class to prove it.

Joe Coulter was pasty white. He had fine but curly hair worn in a bush that fell on his shoulders. Homemade tattoos of hypodermic needles and pentagrams had been etched onto his arms. The sleeves were cut off his jean jacket.

Lucas identified himself and asked the boy about his stepfather who was also his uncle.

"I know who you are. You think I did it. You think I killed him."

Lucas responded instinctively. He figured this was a kid he couldn't mess with. Coulter would be on top of mind games in a second. Lucas just shrugged.

"I didn't off him, but I'm glad the bastard's gone."

"Watch your language, young man," the principal said. He shrank in his chair at Coulter's look.

Lucas said, "It's my job to find out who killed him. Got any ideas?"

Coulter put his hands behind his head and intertwined his fingers. "Somebody who can shoot." He put his hands before him as though he were holding a rifle. "Boom."

Lucas questioned the teenager for another half-hour. Too much time had passed since his stepfather's murder to establish Coulter's whereabouts on that night. Instead, Lucas asked where Coulter had been the previous night, during the time of the latest killing. He'd been home alone. His mother worked the second shift at the mill. Did he know the children of the other victims? He said he'd seen them around, but that was all. Did he hunt? Coulter said he used to. He hunted narcs. That's the way it went.

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Lucas wondered what this kid had been like before he improved. Lucas also pondered Coulter's knowing who he was and the movement he had seen on the hills in front of his trailer that morning. Despite the wondering, when the interview was over, Lucas only *knew* that Coulter did not have an alibi for last night. Not much.

The principal had enjoyed the interrogation, so after expressing halfhearted reservations, he allowed the detective to interview the rest of the victims' children and stepchildren, but not the McCarty's Creek teenager. That would require parental permission.

As it turned out, not being able to talk to the boy from McCarty's Creek didn't matter. Interviewing the remaining children took four and a half hours, and school was out by then anyway.

Lucas walked down the empty school corridors and thought about the day. Except for Coulter's attitude and a shaky alibi, none of the interviews had provided an iota of a clue as to possible connections between the children or with the murders of their parents.

What a waste of time, Lucas thought. Unless, of course, Coulter panned out. He figured the chances of that were about as good as Detective Spurlock finding something on B. R. Matthews. It was doubly depressing to think he was following in Spurlock's footsteps.

Lucas's head was down in thought, so he didn't see the secretary when she walked out the door. He bumped into her and grabbed her elbow to keep the woman from falling.

She pushed her glasses up her nose indignantly. "They did it, didn't they?"

Lucas released her elbow. "Who?"

She looked up and down the hall and whispered, "Joe Coulter and William Barrett."

Lucas wasn't surprised at Coulter. He didn't understand her suspicion of Barrett. He was the kid from McCarty's Creek.

Lucas shrugged. "I don't know." He wanted to gain her confidence, so he emulated her caution and looked toward both ends of the empty hall. He said quietly, "Why do you think William Barrett had anything to do with it?"

"Dungeons and Dragons."

"What?"

"In the library. Every day during lunch. He plays Dungeons and Dragons on the computer." The secretary pushed her glasses up again and nodded knowingly. "It's Satan's work."

Lucas was tired. He'd had precious little sleep the night before. Now he wanted to go home, have a beer, and go to sleep.

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But he couldn't. He hadn't talked to William Barrett yet. Lucas had thought that could wait, but the secretary's revelation changed his mind. For Lucas Anderson, unraveling Teal County crime was his life. Other than his trailer and the Toyota, his reputation for doing that was all he had.

He drove to McCarty's Creek.

The Barrett house sat on the crest of a hill that overlooked the subdivision. To its rear was a pasture that had provided a clear shot from the woods on the other side. William Barrett's father had been sitting next to the pool drinking a gin and tonic when he was shot.

Lucas talked to the mother first. She was reluctant to allow the detective to question her son. She said he was just recovering from the shock of his father's death. She added that shortly before the murder, his father had told William that he had been adopted as an infant. Two jolts within a month. Now, his grades had improved and he was beginning to lose some of his lifelong shyness. She didn't want him traumatized again.

Lucas told her that his questions would be gentle. He wouldn't discuss the murder. He only wanted to ask William about some other students at school. Finally, the mother agreed.

When the mother left the living room to find her son, Lucas took advantage of her absence to look around. It had been over a year since he had been in the home, and at the time he hadn't focused on it. The murderer had obviously not come near the house. In fact, Lucas had seen nothing of it except this living room, where the victim's wife had answered questions about her husband.

The living room featured French doors that led to the pool area. Doors to the right led to a dining room, the kitchen, and the entrance foyer with stairs to the second story. A door to the left was closed. Lucas approached it, looked around, turned the knob quietly, and pushed it gently. The door swung open to reveal a study.

A fireplace surrounded by bricks stood on the opposite side of the room from where Lucas stood. There was a massive desk to his right. The pictures hanging on the wall behind the desk were shots of William's father while he was in the marines. An elaborate and fully stocked wet bar stood next to the desk. Lucas's attention was drawn to the wall to the left of the fireplace.

A finely crafted teak display cabinet ran the length of the wall. The detective wanted to go look, but was afraid William and his mother would return. He had no warrant and the door had been

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closed. He didn't want to find something that he couldn't use in court. That drove him crazy because the cabinet was filled with weapons.

Colonel Barrett had been a collector. The case contained pistols, shotguns, and rifles. The distance from the door was too great for Lucas to identify the rifles, but he assumed several were capable of firing a .223-caliber round at a hundred yards with accuracy. When Lucas heard footsteps coming down the stairs, he closed the door and returned to the chair in which he had been sitting.

The boy walked behind his mother. She reached back and tugged on his arm before he came into full view. William was small for his age. His pale face contained delicate features. His hair was of medium length and bangs fell across his forehead. When he moved to the sofa to sit, Lucas noticed his graceful gait. Lucas wondered how Colonel Barrett had felt about the feminine son he had adopted.

Lucas said he was investigating the father's death and apologized for bringing up a painful memory. The boy nodded. Lucas questioned him as he had the others and heard similar answers. William knew some of the other victims' children, but none were close friends. He had seen Joe Coulter, but had never talked to him. He had spent the previous evening alone in his room playing Nintendo. His voice was flat.

When Lucas asked about Dungeons and Dragons, William's mother spoke. "You weren't supposed to play that anymore."

For the first time William's face showed some emotion. His thin, rosy lips pressed together and his eyes narrowed. "That's when I was younger. I'm older now."

His mother glanced at Lucas. "We'll talk about that later."

Lucas tried to figure out some way to be invited to look at the guns in the den, but couldn't think how to do it. He didn't want to spook the boy.

Not yet, anyway.

Something was all over his face, licking and yapping. Lucas reflexively swatted at it and felt something furry go flying, followed by a yelp. He opened his eyes, and in the reflection from the light of the full moon that seeped through the jalousied window above his head, saw a snow-white blob of fur jump at him from the floor. He swung again, harder, and this time the dog got the message. This time she stayed on the floor and yipped.

Lucas rubbed his eyes and looked at the clock radio. Four forty-

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five. He leaned over the edge of his bed and yelled, "Shut *up!*"

Responding to the attention, Fluffy jumped up and down and increased her pitch.

After throwing his pillow at the frenetic dog, Lucas sat up and subtracted. This time, it wasn't difficult. He'd collapsed at nine the night before, and immediately knew he'd had plenty of sleep. He got up, opened the metal door of his trailer to let the dog out, and started the coffee maker.

The paper hadn't arrived yet, so Lucas sat on the porch and waited. When the paperwoman's VW pulled into Lucas's dirt driveway, Fluffy ran toward the noisy car. "Damn," Lucas said in disappointment when the VW missed the dog, but the close call caused Fluffy to run whimpering under the trailer.

Lucas turned on the porch light and skimmed through the rehash of old news from the murder of two nights before. He had retrieved another cup of coffee before he read the editorial. It was about the murders. It was about how it was time for the Teal County Sheriff's Department to do something about them. Hadn't over a month passed since Detective Anderson said he was close to making an arrest?

Lucas threw the paper down, as he had done the morning before, and said harshly to the empty landscape before him, "You screwed up, Lucas. Big time." At the sound of Lucas's voice, Fluffy appeared and peed on the paper.

Just as he bent and kicked at Fluffy, Lucas heard a whistling by his left ear, followed immediately by a thud from the trailer wall behind him. He immediately recognized what was happening. He'd heard that whistling once before. He fell face down on the plywood floor of his porch and covered his head. Fluffy yelped and began licking Lucas's face happily.

Lucas grabbed the dog and threw her off the side of the porch, then he followed her just as another thud sounded behind him.

The dog, excited at the prospect of unexpected play, followed Lucas as he rounded the trailer. Lucas curled behind the concrete-block supports and rubbed under Fluffy's snout. When ten minutes had passed, Lucas knew it was over. This man, or child, or whoever was shooting at him, wouldn't wait around. Lucas knew that.

Lucas grabbed the dog's head and held her still. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but, Gnat, you are one hell of a dog."

* * *

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Lucas was in his office staring at the blackboard full of names, just as he'd done for two years. Before this morning, he'd felt depressed as he studied the constantly reordered information that had gotten him nowhere.

Now he was angry, and that troubled him. The anger should have come simply because innocent citizens were being murdered. Hadn't he said in his interview with the Georgia Police Academy ten years ago that he wanted to be a law enforcement officer because of his deep concern for his fellow citizens? Yet before the attempt on his own life, he'd felt nothing but depression about his own diminishing reputation. He should have been angry, he told himself, that such things as these murders could happen.

Lucas shook his head. "Maybe you're human after all," he said to the empty room.

He ran a hand through his hair and shook his head again, and then concluded aloud, "So if you're angry, use it."

When Tammi had mentioned the kids, Lucas had felt a slight click. It wasn't an "aha," but it was enough to act on.

Teal County wasn't New York City or Houston or San Francisco. There were no gangs or cults. Kids here didn't kill their parents.

But . . .

He thought of Joe Coulter.

Lucas had been to a seminar in Atlanta on satanic cults. He'd heard some amazing stuff about human sacrifices and indescribable sexual activities among children. He also learned about how deceptive the kids who were involved could be.

But nine murders with *no* clues. Impossible. Maybe Satan could do it, but not his children. They'd make a mistake. And could any kid shoot so well from more than a hundred yards?

Maybe, if one kid's father was a former Marine who collected guns.

He looked over the notes he had made after his interview with William Barrett. His eyes were drawn to the last line.

"I'm older now."

Age. Again.

Lucas grabbed the phone and called the school secretary. When she refused his request, he asked to speak to the principal. The principal gladly provided the birth dates for each of the children of the murder victims. After some quick calculations, the connection was obvious. Every victim had a child who was thirteen, or about

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to turn thirteen, at the time of the murder. But what did that mean? What was it about the age thirteen?

The age of transition. The age when all hell breaks loose. Unlucky number. Evil number.

Then he thought of something else. The lecturer at the Satan seminar had described some of the rituals. A common thread was saying things backwards. The Lord's Prayer, for example. Was thirteen a lucky number for Satanists?

Some kind of initiation—kill a parent?

Lucas shook his head. "You're reaching, big time," he said to the empty room.

Still . . .

Lucas leaned back in his chair and blew air. He decided he'd return to the school and check the kids' schedules from the beginning of their high-school careers. That would take some time. Teal County High School held grades eight through twelve. He'd see if the kids had classes together. Maybe homeroom. He assumed the counselor wouldn't consider schedules to be confidential. If he did, he figured the principal wouldn't.

He looked at the blackboard through squinted eyes. All those names were swimming in front of him. How many more people, and now maybe Lucas himself, would be blown away while he looked for connections by moving the kids' names all over the board and drawing lines as he had done for their murdered parents?

Or stepparents?

Lucas clucked his tongue, thinking again about the broken families. He looked at the children's last names and counted the stepchildren.

A moment later, Lucas's vision cleared. He sat straight up in his chair and stared at the names on the board.

Stepchildren!

That's when it happened—the "aha!"

Lucas moved to the blackboard. First he wiped out all the names of children under twelve. Then he erased Heather Landry, who was Kim Franklin's stepsister. Larry Stark, stepbrother to Richard Crew, was next. Then Hamp Williams. His stepsister was Joanne Blevins. Then Jeff Peterson was gone. He left Joe Coulter's and William Barrett's names. They connected. All of them connected. *Every* dead parent still had a child on the board.

The large number of broken families had blinded him to the coincidence that should have been obvious.

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Lucas *knew* who had murdered the parents. He didn't know why, but he knew *who*. All he had to do now was find the rifle that matched the bullets, and he was certain he knew where it was.

Kevin Spurlock walked in the room. "I know B. R. did it. I stayed on him all day yesterday and I'm goin' back right now. I guarantee you it has somethin' to do with gamblin', drugs, or cars, or 'shine."

Before Spurlock could sit down, Lucas grabbed him and steered him out the door.

"Hey, what you doing?"

"Going to the courthouse. I need your help."

"About time," Spurlock said.

"How can I help you?"

"I need to talk to you about Joe Coulter again."

Today, Dr. Rooker was wearing gray Hush Puppies. "Glad to, except for what's confidential."

Lucas stroked his nose. "I need to know about some other kids too." He took a pad from his coat pocket. "William Barrett, Kim Franklin, Richard Crew, Mariah and Melissa Drake, Rich Flinn, Kalli Black, Phil Blevins, Greg and Jeff Daniels."

Dr. Rooker nodded and rested his elbows on his chair. "All good kids."

"Even Coulter?"

"Victim of circumstance," Dr. Rooker said. "The principal told me you talked to him. I talked to Joe and he told me what he said, so that part's not confidential. His stepfather was horrid. Alcoholic. One time he got drunk and vomited. He rubbed Joe's face in it. Tell me, Detective, what would you be like if you'd lived Joe's life?"

"It's horrible, I'm sure, but that's no excuse for murder."

A beep came through Dr. Rooker's telephone. The secretary announced a call on line one for Detective Anderson. Dr. Rooker handed Lucas the phone.

Lucas said, "Good. That's what I thought. Thanks." He put the phone in its cradle.

Lucas looked at Dr. Rooker. "You're A through F."

"What?"

"The way your counseling staff divides up the students. You're A through F."

Dr. Rooker caressed his beard.

"For example," Lucas said as he sat straight in his chair and glanced at his notebook, "you counsel kids with last names like

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Coulter, Barrett, Franklin, Crew, Drake, Flinn, Blevins, Black, and Daniels. Those are your clients."

Dr. Rooker slumped slightly.

"That was Detective Spurlock on the phone. We got a search warrant. He found the rifle. A Ruger Mini 14 with a night scope attached. It's on the way to the GBI for ballistics."

Dr. Rooker swiveled in his chair, away from Lucas. "I know . . . you know . . . what it's like. You see it just like I do."

"What, Dr. Rooker?"

Rooker swiveled around quickly. "Day after day they come in here. Year after year. Kids who exist in a living hell. A long time ago I thought I could make a difference. Help them adjust." His voice cracked.

"Isn't that what counselors do?"

Rooker's fingers supported his forehead. "That's what you think when you're just out of school." He pounded his fist on the arm of the chair when he said, "But it's *impossible!* What can *I* do about parents who are drunkards or dopeheads and abusers? What can *I* do when the kid has to eat his stepdaddy's vomit?"

"You call Family and Children's Services," Lucas said.

Rooker laughed sarcastically. "Yeah, right. And the kid's back in the home within weeks. Months if he's lucky." The counselor rubbed his face with his hands, then held them still. "I used to tell them, wait. Just wait and hang in there and in a few years, you can be out on your own." He rested his face on his fingers and shook his head. "That is *not* good enough."

"So you took care of it yourself."

Rooker pounded his fist again. "Yes! Every one of those kids has a whole new life and I can prove it." He pulled out a raft of folders from his desk drawer. "Better grades. Teacher evaluations praising improved behavior. Club activities." He threw the folders at Lucas's feet. "It's all there."

Lucas let the folders lie. The detective wanted to mention that *he* had no kids. He hadn't abused anybody, and yet only a gnat dog had saved him.

But Lucas didn't say anything. His anger had diminished. "You can't kill people, Doctor."

Rooker stared at Lucas. Tears emerged from the counselor's eyes. "Maybe you *don't* know what it's like." He unbuttoned his left sleeve and pulled it up.

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Lucas winced involuntarily at the sight. He'd seen it before—scar tissue left from cigarette burns.

Rooker let his sleeve drop. He said quietly, "Detective Anderson, the death of the spirit is much harder than the death of the body. Sometimes . . . life forces cruel choices."

And then Dr. Rooker wept.

DETECTIVERSE

RIND JUSTICE

by DEBORAH LEE

Clarissa, and her beau, Llewellyn,
Specialized in stealing melon.
Crime's Romeo and Juliet,
They were the infamous "Honeyduet."
Said Lew, "Though I'm a lucky felon,
You can't compete with watermelon."
Replied Clarissa: "Gollyx— maybe
That's why you're melancholy, baby.
The time is ripe to make a haul;
Let's hit the nearest produce stall!"
They made their heist that very day
And made a seedy getaway,
But two detectives on the trail
Said: "Sticky fingers lead to jail!"
And as they put the two on ice,
Llewellyn said: "It's been a slice!"

And now, our lovers sit and mope—
Depressed because they canteloupe.

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a *NEW* John Francis Cuddy story by

JEREMIAH HEALY

One of the most popular of present-day private-eye writers, Jeremiah Healy recently received a nomination for the Shamus Award for best short story from the Private Eye Writers of America for his story "Rest Stop" (AHMM, *May, 1992). In this new adventure, a very clever con man lures sleuth John Francis Cuddy to the backwoods of Tutham County . . .*

DOUBLE CON

by JEREMIAH HEALY

1.

Once you've heard it, there's a sound you'll never mistake for any other. My first time, in Vietnam, I thought crazily that it was the whumping noise my mother used to make with her broom cleaning a rug over the clothesline. After that, though, I knew what it was. The sound of a high-velocity bullet impacting human flesh.

Frank J. Doppinger's hand was wrenched from mine, the slug lifting and dropping him akimbo on the ground at the edge of the old firebreak. I'd arrived at this spot after driving an hour from Boston, after passing through Tutham Center, and after six miles of paved rural lane. Enjoying the foliage, I'd carefully watched for the sign screwed to a little post saying Fire Road #7. On the fire road, the acorns launched by the front tires of my Prelude had whacked vigorously at the undercarriage of the car, and I'd spooked a pheasant at the first curve. It was shaping up to be a nice fall day in the country.

Until somebody shot my client out of our handshake.

I was cowering behind a rough-cut boulder, probably pushed up and over by the bulldozer that made the firebreak long ago. I wasn't

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fully conscious of picking it for cover or getting to it. I also couldn't place where the shooter was on the ridge wall across the little valley below the fire road, but from the report of the weapon and the size of the hole in Frank J. Doppinger's green windbreaker, I knew the Smith & Wesson Bodyguard over my right hip was significantly outgunned.

I counted to ten, heard nothing further, and took it up to thirty. Then I crawled and crab-walked from boulder to log and log to stump until I had circled around to the Prelude. I opened the door, climbed up and in, and started the engine. Then I backed out as fast as reverse would take me, the acorns this time sounding like bullets against the chassis and scaring the hell out of me. Again.

I fishtailed onto the main road and drove headfirst for Tutham Center six miles away.

2.

They were both in their thirties. Lacy, the guy in uniform, was tall, blond, and baby-faced. Perrault, the guy in plainclothes, was short, dark, and bearded. Lacy's uniform wasn't particularly well kept, the "Tutham Police" patch the only part that looked clean, much less ironed. Perrault's plainclothes were plain to the point of homespun, a jaunty lumberjack who'd stumbled into the police station.

Lacy rested his rear end on the edge of the interrogation-room table. Perrault turned a folding chair around and sat on it backwards, forearms on the top of the backrest. From the smell of the air, the room probably doubled as a cafeteria.

Perrault handed me back my ID. "So, Mr. John Francis Cuddy, private investigator, you just left him there?"

"That's right."

Lacy snorted. "Glad I ain't a client of yours."

Perrault had a French-Canadian veneer over his English. Lacy came on like a hick. An interesting variation on the Mutt-and-Jeff routine, if I'd been in the mood for it.

"You sending a unit out to find him?"

Perrault smiled. "We're just a wide place in the road, Cuddy. We don't got that many units to spare, send them out on a wild-goose chase."

"You won't have to chase this one. He was shot dead."

"And you claim he's from around here."

"He claimed it. He came to see me in Boston last week, but just briefly. Said he might be back in touch. Then I get a call from the guy to come out and see him."

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Lacy said, "You drive fifty mile on a phone call?"

"The guy said he couldn't come to Boston again easily."

Perrault ran an index finger along his moustache. "And?"

"And the guy gave me a retainer in Boston."

"How much?"

"Three hundred. In cash."

Perrault and Lacy exchanged knowing glances.

Perrault said, "Cash is always nice."

Lacy said, "So you agree to meet this feller on a firebreak."

"He said he didn't have a car, but he could hike to it."

"Why couldn't he just ask you over to the house?"

"He also said he didn't want anybody to know he was seeing me."

Perrault broke in again. "So the guy gives you directions over the phone."

"Yes. He tells me, come to Tutham Center. Take the road west out of town till you see the turnoff for Fire Road Number Seven. Then go along it about two hundred yards to a clearing."

"And you agree to see a guy in the woods."

"Yes."

"Without you check him out first?"

"Perrault, he said he didn't want anybody to know he was hiring me. He gave me a retainer. I did check directory assistance, no telephone number registered to the name. Look, have you heard from that unit yet? They should be—"

Lacy said, "Just hold your horses there, boy. You ain't even told us the name of your deceased client yet."

He was right. "Sorry. It was Doppinger, Frank J."

Lacy's eyes got wide. Perrault's arms came off the backrest. Both looked at each other, then back to me.

Perrault said, "Lou, get a unit out there. Fast. And get the chief."

Lacy got up. "But it's Saturday, Reg. He'll be out tending his vegetables."

Perrault just barely kept the knife out of his voice. "So, you beep him, Lou. That's why he carries the thing."

Lacy left and slammed the door behind him.

I said, "You know this Doppinger, then?"

Perrault tugged on his beard and told me to shut up.

Twenty minutes later, Lou Lacy came back in with a hulking guy in his late forties. This one wore blue denim overalls and a chamois shirt, both materials dirt-caked and grass-stained. He had a craggy

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face, no discernible hairstyle, and a pair of cop's eyes as dead as a plastic doll's.

The introduction consisted of, "I'm chief of police for Tutham. Let's hear it. From the beginning."

After I caught him up to where I'd left off with Lacy and Reg Perrault, the chief said to Lacy. "Let me know when the unit reports in from number seven."

Lacy started to say something, then thought better of it. "You bet, Chief."

After Lacy left, the chief tucked his right hand into the strap of his overalls just below the clipped-on beeper. "This Doppinger give you any reason why he didn't want folks to know about him seeing you?"

"Not over the phone. After I met him on the fire road, though, he said it was about his wife."

Perrault took in a breath. The chief glanced at him, but Perrault's face was neutral.

The chief said to me, "What about his wife?"

"I'd told Doppinger when he saw me in Boston that I didn't do domestics, and he'd told me it had nothing to do with that. But then out on the road, he said his wife was fouling up his life, that he could see her filing for divorce pretty soon, and that he didn't want her taking the house he'd worked so long to own."

Perrault started paying attention to the floor.

The chief's eyes never left me. "But you say you'd told him in Boston—"

"Right, right. And I told him that on the road, too. He smiled and said, 'Well, just a misunderstanding, then,' and told me to keep the three hundred."

The chief shook his head, as if to clear it. "The man tells you, 'Keep the money'?"

"Yes." It sounded stupid to me, too, but there it was.

"Then what?"

"Then Doppinger extends his hand to me, and I take it, and somebody on the other side of the valley busts him out of his shoes."

"And you just left the man."

"I've seen the dead before, Chief. Big hole, eyes open, pieces of his lung—"

"I've seen dead people before too, Cuddy. But—"

There was a knock at the door.

"Yeah?"

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Lou Lacy stuck his head in, a confused look on his face. The overalls shambled out, closing the door behind him.

A minute inched by. I was pretty sure that Perrault wouldn't tell me anything with or without his boss there, so I just tried to relax.

The chief came back into the room alone, crossing his arms and latching onto both straps of the overalls for lateral support.

"Our people just drove out Fire Road Seven, Cuddy."

"And?"

"Nobody."

It took a second to register that he meant, "No body."

I said, "What?"

"The unit drove the length of the break. Three times down and back. No corpse, no blood, no nothing."

"Chief . . . " I took a breath, started again. "Chief, there has to be."

"There isn't."

"Look, I was standing there, shaking hands with the guy, for Christ's sake. Frank J. Doppinger is dead."

"I don't think so."

"Why, because—"

"Because I'm Frank J. Doppinger."

"Oh."

The three of us moved into the chief's office, the nameplate centered on his desk saying "FRANK J. DOPPINGER" in brass relief. Next to the plate was a stand-up frame, a photo of a woman maybe ten years younger than the chief. Doppinger and Perrault were sipping coffee from Styrofoam cups. I hadn't seen Lacy since he stuck his head in the interrogation room.

Reg Perrault said, "Cuddy, why you figure anybody would want to fake a murder?"

"It wasn't fake."

"Your client was."

The chief spoke to the framed photo. "The part about the wife wasn't fake."

Perrault didn't say anything, so I didn't either.

Doppinger said, "Ellen and I have been having . . . problems, Cuddy. She's thinking about getting a divorce. Already went to see a lawyer down to Worcester. Reg, this remind you of anything?"

Perrault acted like he wasn't sure what the chief meant.

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Doppinger said, "Sorry, Reg." Then to me, "Detective Perrault and Ellen were in school together." The farmer turned back to the lumberjack. "Does Cuddy's story remind you of one of our cases, Reg?"

Perrault said, "The double con."

I said, "The what?"

The chief said, "Reg?"

Perrault licked his lips. "Four, five years ago—"

Doppinger said, "More like seven or eight."

A nod. "There was this guy out here, running a double con. Name of Moddicky. Rudolph Moddicky. He impersonated guys who really existed and worked in stocks, bonds, whatever. Then he'd con the elderly with that con, using a real guy's rep to get inside, then ripping them off. We—the chief, caught him."

Doppinger said, "By coincidence. Pure luck."

Perrault made sure the chief was finished. "The guy copped a plea but drew some heavy time anyway. He played his cards close in the joint, got out with a lot of good time credit."

I said, "When?"

Doppinger said, "About two weeks ago. Back when he went away, Moddicky made the usual threats about getting even, so I put a routine request in to the parole officer for notification-upon-release. I got a call from his P.O. saying Moddicky was coming out."

I thought about it. "You have a mug shot of him?"

Doppinger picked up his phone and mumbled into it. We waited while somebody just outside his door opened and closed a file cabinet, then came in. Lou Lacy.

Lacy seemed angry as he handed a manila folder to Doppinger, who said, "Thanks, Lou." Doppinger waited until Lacy was out of the room before sliding the file across the desk to me.

Something must have shown on my face, because Doppinger said, "Lou's mama was one of the people Moddicky screwed."

I opened the folder. Stapled to the cover was the front and profile of a slim young man with tailored haircut, wide-set eyes, and winning smile. "Not my client. He was pushing fifty and burly, kind of sad-looking."

Doppinger said, "Like me."

I didn't answer.

The chief said, "I think when I talked to that P.O. he said a couple of other guys were released from Moddicky's cellblock right before

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him. A Shaw, maybe a Bennett and an Olsen, too. Reg, can you run them for me?"

"Got a name for the P.O.?"

"Garcia, I think. Male."

"I'll get on it right away, Chief."

Doppinger stood up. "I think maybe I ought to be heading home."

Perrault was clearly trying to figure out a nice way to ask a difficult question. It came out, "You want some company?"

Doppinger said, "I'm hoping I don't have any company stopping by."

Perrault said, "Chief—"

Doppinger held up a meaty hand. "We don't know there's any connection between the client Cuddy says got shot and Moddicky coming hunting. I'm not about to gather all our wagons around the wrong spot if there is a connection and Moddicky's hunting something else. Reg, whyn't you take Mr. Cuddy here down to the motel and settle him in."

Perrault looked in my direction.

Distracted, Doppinger turned to me. "Sorry. That three hundred buy us your time for the night?"

I said, "Sure, Chief."

3.

Reg Perrault directed me to the only motel in town. I checked into a stale, dark room with two double beds. The clerk directed me to the only restaurant in town, a fifties diner with chrome counter-stools (sporting padded swivel seats) and a Formica countertop (sporting dated jukebox selectors). The diner had a license, so I mixed a little alcohol from a glass with the cholesterol from my plate.

Back at the room, I thought about why the body wasn't where it was supposed to be. When that didn't get me anywhere, I tried the TV. An old *Mannix* episode was in commercial as the first siren screamed by outside. I was opening the door of the Prelude when the second cruiser blew past a minute later.

It wasn't that hard to find. Kind of out in the woods and down another country lane, but I just had to follow the noise, then the bubble lights bouncing off the treeline once the drivers pulled to a stop.

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A guy wearing a six-inch Colt Magnum but no uniform stopped me at the edge of the driveway. I told him who I was and suggested he tell Doppinger, Perrault, or Lacy that I was there. He left me and came back just as an older man parked a four-wheel-drive Subaru behind me. The older man got out slowly, carrying the sort of little black bag doctors used to take on house calls.

The doctor and I followed Magnum up the driveway and around the cruisers toward a beautiful farmhouse. About ten feet from the porch, we reached Lou Lacy, kneeling beside a man lying on his stomach. A Winchester rifle, with scope, nestled in the grass near the sprawled arms of the man on the ground. He had a tailored haircut and wide-set eyes and broken teeth where he'd kissed a rock falling. He also had an entry wound between his shoulder blades and two exit wounds where his lungs would hang.

The doctor didn't pause, but Lacy looked up and shook his head negatively anyway. He was grinning as he did it.

Inside the front door, Perrault was standing next to the body of a woman lying face-up on the carpet. Given the entry wound at her cheekbone, the exit wound in back would cost you your dinner. The hair color and one eye told me she had been the woman pictured on Doppinger's desk.

Magnum left us. After glancing down at the woman, the doctor continued over to Frank Doppinger. The chief was sitting in an easy chair, still wearing the same shirt and overalls. At his right bicep, blood seeped into the torn sleeve. The palm of his left hand covered something north of his nose, but I didn't see anything red streaming between the fingers.

I looked at Perrault.

Very quietly, he said, "Chief was in the kitchen. Heard the front door kicked open and then the rifle. By the time he got into the living room, Moddicky out there was on the porch."

Perrault shook his head. "Chief got him once and spun him, then Moddicky got off a grazer and the chief got him twice more, last one in the back as Moddicky was going down."

I watched the doctor talking to Doppinger and cutting at the right sleeve with a pair of small scissors. The chief's left hand was down now, and he looked at me.

I turned and left the house.

At first light, I was in the Prelude and slewing onto Fire Road #7. It was dead quiet as the autumn sun broke the tops of the trees.

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Driving to the end of the break, I couldn't find the spot from the day before. I even got out at the one gathering of boulders that looked close, but not quite right. Other than some recent tire tracks, there was nothing to indicate anyone had been there in weeks.

I drove back out in the still dead quiet, finally realizing that something was out of kilter. I stopped the car at the main road and thought about it.

Acorns. There were no acorns ricocheting off the undercarriage.

I did a three-pointer and went back up the firebreak. The ground was clear, nothing in the ruts. Squirrels, maybe?

Leaving the car, I walked a hundred feet in each direction, studying the foliage pretty carefully. Acorns fall from mighty oaks. No acorns because there were no oak trees. None.

I went back to the main road and checked the little sign for Fire Road #7. There were a couple of fresh scratches in the screws holding the sign to the post.

I continued up the main road to Fire Road #8 and tried it. Acorns within fifty feet. The boulders beyond that, exactly where they should be. Double con; the client masquerading as Frank Doppinger met me on Fire Road #8 masquerading as #7.

I stopped the Prelude at the boulders and got out. There was some dried blood on one rock, but no pieces of tissue thanks to whatever insects had scoured the area. I found some scuff marks where I remembered crouching for cover and some more where someone had hefted something off the ground. Sidestepping downslope about twenty feet, I saw a disturbed section of earth. Some creatures bigger than insects had dug into the shallow grave. What was left of a face and throat ended at the collar of the green windbreaker.

I climbed back up the slope, wiping my hands on my haunches even though I hadn't dirtied them. I sat in my car and thought about it. Tried to think through it. Then I turned the key in the ignition and headed back toward town.

4.

"Cuddy?"

"Chief."

Doppinger looked up at me. His right arm was in a sling, his left hand hanging up the telephone next to the living room chair he'd been sitting in the night before.

I said, "Sorry to be interrupting."

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"No. No, just making some . . . " he waved at the phone, "arrangements. You heading back to Boston?"

"Shortly. Thought I ought to report something to you first."

"What's that?"

"I found a body."

He blinked. "Where?"

"Fire Road Number Eight."

"Eight?"

"Yeah. The killer conned me into thinking I was on Seven yesterday by switching the signs."

Doppinger hung his head and shook it. "That Moddicky. Always thinking."

"I also put a phone call in to Garcia."

"Garcia?"

"That parole officer you called about Moddicky and his blockmates."

"Oh. Right."

"He gave me a bunch of names and addresses. Seems you were right. A photo's on its way, but I'm pretty sure the guy I met as Frank J. Doppinger out on the fire road is Joey Benson, one of the other inmates released just before Moddicky."

"Benson, you say?" Doppinger took a breath. "Yeah, figures Moddicky'd use somebody he knew to set up his little game."

"Yeah, it does. But why did Moddicky kill him, do you suppose?"

Doppinger started to shrug, then remembered his sling. "Take out a witness."

"A witness to what?"

Doppinger straightened a little. "To your being approached by the guy."

"You figure that's why Moddicky decided to switch the signs and hide the body, too?"

"Who knows? Moddicky was an odd one, Cuddy. Maybe he got off on burying things."

I waited a moment. "Nobody said anything about the guy being buried, Chief."

Doppinger's eyes clouded.

I said, "I think the killer approached the guy I met and paid him to impersonate Frank J. Doppinger and feed me the song and dance that got me out on that fire road. The killer wanted the arrow to point toward Moddicky, but not too clearly too soon. Otherwise, the

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level of protection you should have mounted at your house yesterday might have been uncomfortably high."

The voice got raspy. "What are you saying?"

"You needed a way out of the marriage, preferably death over divorce so you'd get to keep this house. It was sharp of you to mention your talk with the parole officer to Perrault and me. Even sharper to admit he'd told you about other blockmates of Moddicky, 'Bennett' instead of 'Benson.' But Garcia also says he gave you names and addresses."

"Moddicky pulled a double con on you, Cuddy. He's still got you believing it."

"No, Chief. The double con the killer had in mind couldn't work with Moddicky directly. He knew you and hated you. But it could work with Benson, a blockmate Moddicky could have known but probably never buddied up to, never told how Frank J. Doppinger brought him down. You hired Benson to get me into it. You would have had to snatch Moddicky a couple of days ago, though. To be sure nobody would come forward with an unshakable alibi for him once he was dead. Tell me, Chief, where did you stash him?"

"You're blowing smoke up your own—"

"Anyway, you did stash Moddicky out here someplace, alive. You watched my meeting with Benson, picking him off when you saw us shaking hands, knowing he'd already told me everything you wanted me to hear. Then you waited for me to slink off before burying Benson and switching back the signs. Nice touch, by the way, to tell the boys you'd be in your garden. Made them beep you instead of telephoning and let you show up at the station in soiled overalls, fresh from Benson's hasty grave."

Doppinger's left hand dropped to the outside of his thigh, rubbing it. "You can't prove any of this, Cuddy."

"Here at the house last night you shot Moddicky with your service revolver and your wife with the Winchester you'd used on Benson. Then you probably fired a round through the rifle with Moddicky's dead hands around it and another through your sleeve with something to catch the powder burns."

The doll's eyes got colder as a snub-nosed revolver appeared from under the seat cushion.

"It won't wash, Chief."

"Sure it will, Cuddy. You came to the station yesterday, claiming this Benson was your client. You were in with him and Moddicky all along."

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"I'm not even armed."

"I put a throwaway in your hand, and nobody will know you weren't."

"Perrault and Lacy will know."

"What?"

"They frisked me before I came in here."

"They . . . ?"

From the kitchen door, Perrault's voice said, "Put it down, Chief."

From the porch window, Lacy leveled a shotgun. "Please, Chief."

Doppinger's eyes went around the room, through the walls and around the house. Measuring something. Maybe his losses.

He dropped the snubbie on the floor and used the hand to cover his face instead.

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

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B	A	R	A	■	L	E	A	S	E	■	R	I	C	E
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Wynnewood, Pennsylvania resident Seymour Shubin has a new satire for us that will probably strike a chord with users of the Northeast's beaches—and anyone who gets hung up on a matter of principle . . .

A MATTER OF PRINCIPLE

by SEYMOUR SHUBIN

I don't know what got into Midge after all these years, three years to be exact, about the beach badges. After all, we'd been buying them all this time. But now, the first day of our first weekend of the season, as we walked to the beach and saw the sign that said you could buy the badges at the little kiosk outside the township police station or from the "beach-badge girl" who patrolled the beaches, Midge said, "It's all wrong, I'm not going to do it."

Actually I'd been hearing this from the time they'd first introduced beach badges here.

"Beaches should be free, they should belong to everyone. It's a disgrace; they put a gun to your head to let you use Nature's beach and ocean."

But we would always buy them—"season" badges, since we rented a room almost every weekend, and it came out cheaper than the daily or weekly badges. But almost immediately after we would come on the beach, Midge would point out all the people who didn't have badges displayed on them.

This time, though, there was something in her voice, her look, that said she really meant it.

"We're not doing it this year, Harry. It's really become a matter of principle."

"Midge, I don't need this aggravation."

"Don't be a doormat, Harry."

So we walked down the hot, thick sand of the path through the dune, to the even hotter sand of the beach, and I set up our chairs and spread out the blanket and put in the beach umbrella, working it back and forth until it was in there deep. And Midge, who never

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burned, sat down away from the umbrella, with her little stack of women's magazines, while I put my chair under it and applied, I think, #45 sunblock, though I'd read that the most you really needed was 15.

Once in a while, almost against my will, I would bring my chair out from under the umbrella, but soon would go back under. I still resented what she'd said once, though it was years ago, but had implied many times since, that the only reason I burned was that my mind let it happen.

From the shade of the umbrella, I took in the scattering of groups on the beach, the partly submerged rock jetty under some circling seagulls, the rounding and crash of waves, the widely spread houses whose wooden decks overlooked it all from beyond the dunes. But I was really looking for the beach-badge girl; I had barely glanced at my book.

I saw her about twenty minutes later. There was a different girl each year, but in some ways they were always the same: they'd spend most of the time by the lifeguard stand, staring up and talking to them. Like the others, this one had a bag filled with beach badges slung from her shoulder. She was touching at her hair and smiling at the lifeguards and once threw her head back in laughter as one of them bent down to her to say something. Then she began her walk, first in the opposite direction from us, then back along the edge of the ocean, a little distance away.

Midge said, "Don't look at her."

"*Midge,* you don't have to look at her, she'll be over. Do you have money?"

"Harry, I'm not paying until I have to. Don't look at her."

"But what do we say if she comes over?"

"We left them at the house."

"But we'll have to get 'em sooner or later."

"Look," Midge said, "she's not even coming this way."

It was true. She stopped at a few clusters of people by the surf, then walked on past us.

"But she'll be coming back," I said.

"Harry, don't be a wimp. Look at all these people without badges."

"Where? Where? I don't see one."

"You remember last year. That guy with the moustache? He never had one, the whole summer."

I never could recall seeing that guy, though half the summer last year Midge would nod toward someone and say look, look, he doesn't have a badge.

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Anyway, I gave a fast look back over my shoulder, and the badge girl, with her short blond hair and little bikini, was still heading away, stopping now and then by people, and once in a while giving out badges and making change and conversation.

My heart was really going. I'd been a trial lawyer almost twenty-five years and I don't remember it ever going harder even right before a trial.

I just about buried my face in my book, as though to hide from the world, then looked over my shoulder again.

"Midge, she's coming, here she comes."

"Let's go in the water." Midge was already rising.

"Midge, I don't feel like going in the water."

"Then buy a badge," she said, starting to walk off. "But don't buy two."

I got up and followed her. The water almost froze my left foot the instant I inserted it, and it wasn't any better when I tried it with my right foot. The lifeguards were staring out, so I went in just deep enough to cover the badge on my trunks, if I'd had one. Everyone around me was jumping and diving and body-surfing the waves back to the beach. From what I could see, every one of them had beach badges. Midge was dunking.

I waited until the girl was back at the lifeguard stand before I headed out, going on a sharp diagonal from her toward our chairs. Midge came back and dried herself briskly. A few minutes later here came the badge girl, right to us. She gave us a big smile.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," said Midge, and I smiled.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Oh, it's gorgeous," Midge said. And then Midge asked her if she knew what happened to last year's badge girl, and the girl said she'd heard that she was taking summer courses; and Midge wanted to know did she herself go to school, and she said yes, Penn State, she was a junior, she was thinking of becoming a vet.

They must have talked for ten minutes, during which time the girl said her name was Ann, and her parents were divorced, and this was a wonderful job though it didn't pay much, but the people were so nice. She never asked about beach badges, except with her eyes as she was about to go; and Midge said, "Oh my, I just remembered, we left our badges at the house."

Ann smiled as she said, starting to walk away, "Real nice talking to you. I'll talk to you again."

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I watched her walk off, her little behind swinging just enough.

"Midge," I said, finally turning to her, "for God's sake, it would cost us all of ten dollars apiece. For the whole *summer*."

"I'm not going to give them the satisfaction until I have to."

"I'm *embarrassed*. I can't *relax*."

"What're they going to do to you? Put you in jail? If you *have* to, you'll buy one. But wait till you *have* to. I'm telling you, look at all these people."

But I still couldn't see one person without a badge.

We left the beach a little after five; Ann had never returned in all that time. But the next day all the anxiety was back as I walked toward the beach. Again Ann was over with the lifeguards, chatting up at them and laughing.

This time when I saw her beginning her approach I turned over on the blanket, on my stomach, my face under my folded arms. My heart was popping up at me, but above it I could hear the exchange of hi's, and something more about what a nice day, and then Midge chastising herself, "Would you believe I still left mine at the house? Oh dear, I don't know if Harry brought his."

"Don't wake him. I'll be back."

As Ann retreated, I glared across my arm at Midge.

"I think," she said, "I'll go in the water."

Watching her walk off, I made up my mind the hell with her, I'm buying one for myself. But as Ann headed back toward us about an hour later, while Midge was settled in her chair with a beach towel spread over her, as though her badge might be under it, I walked quickly to the house.

Once in a while I'd get up from the damn TV in the shadowed room and stare out the window toward the beach at the end of the sun-gilded street.

Midge came back a few hours later.

"Why'd you leave? It was so beautiful out."

Why'd I leave, why'd I leave? Like last night, like a million things. Why didn't I wear the tan slacks I'd started to put on until she noticed?

"You know something?" she called to me later, after she stepped out of the shower. "I love this place so much, when I die I'd like my ashes scattered on the ocean here. Promise me."

Something had never come into my mind, at least my conscious mind, until that moment.

* * *

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I brought the ashes the following summer, in a perfectly cleaned-out mayonnaise jar. I had a beach badge on my trunks, as did Joanne on the hip-curve of her scant bikini. They were in fact the first things I bought when we drove onto the island, and Joanne, the young blond widow of a former client of mine, was even good enough to get out of the car for me and go up to the kiosk to make the transaction.

"Actually I hate these," she said as she got back in the car. "I think the beaches should be free."

"Oh," I said, "I think they serve a good purpose."

A little later, sitting with her under the umbrella after we'd applied sunblock to each other, I told her I wanted to collect some shells. She walked with me, all innocence and beauty, that little behind swaying, and may even have watched me as I dipped the jar in the surf to rinse it out.

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Rebecca Rothenberg's first novel, The Bulrush Murders, *received nominations for both the Agatha and Anthony awards in 1992 and was named one of the ten best novels of the year by the* Los Angeles Times. *"Like the forthcoming* Dandelion Murders *(The Mysterious Press)," Ms. Rothenberg tells us, " 'Locoweed' is set in the same world—the hot, dry, agricultural Central Valley of California—and involves the same cast of characters. 'Locoweed,' however, is told from the point of view of someone who ordinarily plays a supporting role in my series: Claire Sharples's boyfriend Sam, taciturn local boy, lover, father, borderline nerd . . ."*

LOCOWEED

by REBECCA S. ROTHENBERG

1.

"Let's give a big hand to these little ladies from Tierra Buena," the announcer said, his enthusiasm unwavering even though this was the fifth group of peanut-shaped, sequin-clad, baton-manipulating little girls to pass in the last half-hour.

The inhabitants of Riverdale, California, population fifteen thousand, elevation one thousand, cheered dutifully; Claire Sharples, B.S., M.S., Ph.D. Microbiology (MIT 1980), the Diane Arbus of the San Joaquin Valley, snapped pictures ecstatically, loving every lipsticked and mascaraed babyface. And Sam Cooper, M.S. Agronomy (Cal State 1978), read a magazine.

He had marched, if that was the word, in the Riverdale rodeo parade every year between the ages of six and sixteen: with the cub scouts, with 4-H, with the boy scouts, with his high school band, with Search-and-Rescue. The parade held no charm for him.

What he liked was the rodeo, which started in a few hours and which left Claire cold, being to her Eastern eyes tedious and to her photographer's eyes messy. But after some negotiation, a constant feature of their unlikely relationship, each agreed to accompany the other.

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He looked up briefly when Claire poked him in the ribs.

"It's J. T. Cummings!" she hissed, and sure enough, here came the mounted posse of the county sheriff's department, led by Sheriff Cummings himself. He was flanked by three pink and portly clones carrying aloft the standards of the United States, the Golden Bear Republic, and the County of Kaweah, and was followed by twenty-nine middle-aged men squeezed into smart uniforms, their mounts in far better shape than themselves. Still, they rode well and conveyed a certain Cossack menace.

"J. T.'s always in the parade," Sam said in a bored voice. "Usually competes in the rodeo, too, and makes a damn fool of himself."

"I didn't even know he could ride!"

"Most people who grow up here can ride, Claire."

"Can you?"

"Of course!"

She looked at him respectfully and he savored the unfamiliar sensation—she was a hard woman to impress—then returned to this month's featured article, "Biological Control of Powdery Mildew in Apricots."

"—a special treat," the announcer was saying. "Former Rodeo Princess, Rodeo Queen, and Western Belle Equestrienne, and currently owner of EastWind Arabian Horse Ranch. We've missed her the last few years here at the rodeo, but now here she is, on her prize-winning Arabian stallion Barney's Pride. Let's have a big hand for our own—GLENDA CANNON!"

Claire noticed that Sam had lowered his magazine and was standing very straight. At the far end of the street a slim figure on a white horse came slowly into view, the horse prancing and sidestepping in a nervous way. As they drew closer Claire could see that the rider was a woman, and that she was dressed like a Spanish caballero, her blond hair set off by a dark broad-brimmed hat, her slender body emphasized by tight-fitting trousers and short jacket. She favored the crowd with a professional smile and as she passed, Claire thought her gaze lingered on Sam—and herself.

"A friend?" she whispered to Sam.

"Sort of."

At that moment a small dog ran yapping across the street, almost under the feet of the white horse. The stallion stopped dead in its tracks, pondered its next move, then started for the crowd at a dead run.

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Glenda Cannon stood in the stirrups and pulled hard on the reins. Instead of responding, the horse reared up on its hind legs. For a moment it looked as if Glenda would be thrown. But she balanced like a skier as the stallion plunged and kicked. Slowly, with seemingly superhuman strength, she turned its head and contained its movements. Then, suddenly, the hellfire died in the horse's eyes, the mutiny was over, and Glenda was back in control, composure and rictus smile intact.

It was a superb display, and Claire joined reluctantly in the spontaneous applause. Sam stood with his hands at his sides.

"That's the kind of horsewomanship we expect from a Riverdale Rodeo Queen," the announcer said warmly. "And now"—as a forlorn-looking little girl whirled and twirled her way up the street—"we have another baton demonstration by little Rosie Jye—Jye—" (whispered consultation) "—Jimenez!" he pronounced triumphantly, "little Rosie Jimenez, of Parkerville . . ."

Claire clutched a plate of Farm Bureau barbecue in her left hand and Riverdale Civic Association barbecue in her right and paused to look towards the foothills of the Sierras. In April those hills were not yet their normal parched brown, but a lush green. And the sky was not the hard pewter of midsummer but a soft blue, with puffy clouds—a New England sky. Even the Central Valley, twelve miles to the west, looked good this time of year, and smelled intoxicatingly of orange blossoms.

Altogether a pleasing prospect. She looked down the rows of bleachers and found Sam, conspicuous as the only male not wearing a cowboy hat, leaning against the wooden arena railing. Three aisles to her right, a gleaming blond head caught her eye and she saw Riverdale's Own Glenda Cannon, shading her eyes with her hand and staring down at the arena. Claire had the distinct impression that she, too, was watching Sam. Then she turned and vanished into the crowd.

Claire walked gingerly down the wooden risers to the railing. "Which one's the Farm Bureau's?" asked Sam, reaching for a plate.

She squelched her curiosity about Glenda, at least for the moment. "Uh-uh," she admonished. "We're going to conduct a blind taste-test here—"

"The Farm Bureau's always the best," he interrupted, snatching the plate from her left hand, "and they always have biscuits instead of bread. I'll go get some beer."

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As she balanced the remaining flimsy paper plate on her knees, Tom Martelli wandered over, dressed in full Riverdale police chief regalia.

"Crowd control?" she asked.

"Mm-hmm. They can get ugly," he said serenely, surveying the mothers and fathers and little kids and giggly teenagers and old geezers.

"You ever arrest anybody here?"

"Oh, once some kids got drunk and started stealing hubcaps out in the parking lot. You know," he added very seriously, "the Farm Bureau's barbecue is a lot better. They give you biscuits—"

"—instead of bread. I know."

Sam appeared with two translucent plastic cups of beer and handed one to Claire.

"Say," said Tom, "why don't you all come over for a beer on Sunday? Marie's going to be gone—"

"Can't. I'm driving Claire down to L.A., to the airport," Sam said after a moment.

"Going back East?"

"Yes," she said, not looking at Sam, "for a couple of weeks."

Once the rodeo began in earnest Claire slumped on the bleachers and checked out "Biological Control of Powdery Mildew in Apricots." It didn't tell her anything new, and at first she welcomed the frequent interruptions by other rodeo-goers more interested in socializing than in the calf-roping—which included almost all of Sam's and her colleagues from the Agricultural Experimental Field Station. One by one they trooped by, families in tow, unfazed by Sam's monosyllabic grunts and unshakable concentration on the arena; he was accepted as something of an eccentric. Claire, however, although by nature also reserved, felt compelled as a newcomer to be cordial, and wore herself out in twenty minutes.

Luckily, at this point there was a break in the action, and while the Western Belle Equestrienne Drill Team executed some convoluted maneuvers that were neither functional nor beautiful, Sam spotted someone he wanted to speak to. He climbed up on the bench, cupped his hands, and bellowed, "Eddie! Eddie Froelich!"

Fifty yards away a figure turned around, scanned the crowd, and waved. In a minute he was standing before them: lean, good-looking, youngish, thinning red hair, his eyes a hot blue under near-white

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eyebrows. A harassed-looking woman and two towheaded little girls trailed behind.

He and Sam pumped arms and thumped shoulders.

"Hey, buddy," Eddie said, "it's been too long!"

"Way too long! How're things at Westside?" Westside was another Agricultural Field Station way over on the arid western side of the Valley, and Claire concluded that this Eddie person must be a friend from Ag school. Sam suddenly remembered the manners that Claire's skillful nagging had drilled into him.

"Oh, uh, Eddie, this is Claire Sharples," he said, putting his arm around her. "She works down at Citrus Cove, too. She's a microbiologist."

"Oh, a *real* scientist, huh?" Eddie said with a trace of sarcasm that he diffused with a laugh and a friendly, "Pleased to meet you."

There was a silence, during which all parties anticipated the introduction of Eddie's wife and daughters—all parties excepting Eddie, whose next words were, "Well, listen, old buddy, what you been up to?" And he and Sam resumed talking.

The woman smiled ruefully. "I'm Mary Jo Froelich," she said, "and this is Stacey"—resting her hand on the bigger girl's shoulder—"and Kristin." She smiled fondly at them.

"They're adorable," said Claire, a little mechanically. She was listening with half an ear to the men's conversation; Sam was being deliberately charming and she wondered why.

"Not riding this year?" he was asking.

"Nope—my bones ain't made of rubber like they used to be. And neither is my head!"

Sam laughed. "You used to be mighty good, Eddie," he said, then added casually, "Played any ball lately?"

Claire suppressed a smile. Recruiting for softball; that explained most of these sudden spurts of sociability. She turned her attention back to Mary Jo and the girls.

Suddenly Kristin declared that she wanted a grape Slurpee.

"Not now, honey," her mother said. "You just had one. Maybe before we go—"

"—I want one NOW!" Kristin wailed in her piercing three-year-old's voice. Eddie Froelich whirled, his freckled face reddening.

"Kristin," he said through clenched teeth, "if you don't shut up I'm going to whomp you into next week!"

The little girl shrank against her mother, and Claire took a step backward, startled by the outburst, whose violence was so dispropor-

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tionate to the offense. Mary Jo, however, seemed embarrassed but not really disturbed, and Eddie subsided as quickly as he had exploded.

"Kids!" he said with a weak grin. "She's been ornery all day."

"We'd better take them back to our seats," said Mary Jo, casting him a look that said We'll Talk About This Later. Eddie lingered for a moment.

"Let's get together soon," he said almost wistfully. "And I'll call you about softball. Though I don't have much free time these days," he added with a sharp laugh, looking after his wife and daughters.

Sam watched his retreating back. "Used to be the best shortstop in Kaweah County," he remarked, and after a moment added, "and the luckiest man in the lower San Joaquin Valley. Or unluckiest, depending on who you talk to."

Claire looked at him curiously.

"Used to be married to Glenda Cannon."

It rained Monday and again Tuesday. A mass of moist air parked over the Great Basin, just east of the Sierras, was sending these daily downpours, and the customary dry heat of the Valley became oppressively humid.

"A little preparation for Back East," said Sam as they sat on the front steps of his house on Tuesday evening after the rain. Despite almost a year of cohabitation, Claire still regarded the little cabin high in the foothills as "Sam's house."

"Boston's miserable in the summer," she agreed, though they both knew she could hardly wait to leave. Bookstores. Seafood. Foreign films. Jazz on the radio. Good friends. She might even drop in on the conference that the Field Station was paying her to attend.

"How do you know Eddie?" she asked as a distraction.

"High school," Sam replied briefly.

"And Glenda?" she asked after a moment.

"Same."

"Was she your girlfriend?"

Sam gave a bark of laughter. "Good God, no! I wasn't in her league. For one thing, the Cannons were rich. Otherwise, no Arabian horse-breeding ranch for little Glenda. It's an expensive hobby. No, that's not fair," he corrected himself scrupulously. "She's worked real hard at that business." He paused, then said, "She loves those horses," in a strangely muffled voice that held an echo of obscene adolescent speculations, Parkerville High boys' locker room, circa

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1966: Just exactly how did Glenda love those horses, anyway?

"Glenda wasn't really anybody's girlfriend," he continued. "She was kind of wild; went out with a lot of guys, Eddie included. He was varsity football and basketball," he added in irrefutable explanation, "but he really wasn't good enough for her. Nobody was.

"But when I got back from Thailand, he and Glenda were married. To everybody's surprise, most of all Eddie's, I think. And personally, I figure she just needed somebody to help run the ranch. Because she divorced him. In two years. And Eddie didn't get anything in the settlement, either, because the judge happened to be a golf buddy of Barney Cannon's, and he ruled that everything had been Glenda's before the marriage, so under common property Eddie wasn't entitled to it. Well, Eddie sort of went nuts for a while: lawsuits, threatening letters—he even vandalized the ranch."

"How do you know all this?" Claire broke in.

"Christ, everybody knew it!" (Stupid question; everybody always knew everything that happened in this county.) "He made a public spectacle of himself," he said with exasperation, whether at her or at Eddie she couldn't tell. "Finally settled down; went back to school, remarried, got himself a job at Westside. I guess his degree's in animal husbandry, 'cause it's mostly cattle ranching over there."

Silence. Suddenly Claire said, "Debby looks sort of like Glenda, doesn't she?" Debby was Sam's ex-wife.

"Well, they're both blond." He looked uncomfortable, then burst out, "Damn, Claire, that was twenty years ago!"

He had known exactly what she meant, which was provocative in itself. But really, she was merely curious—extremely curious. Sam's emotional history was a barred and shuttered room. He could tell her with great accuracy where he had been and what he had done, but not how he had felt, and any glimpse into that black box was pursued eagerly. Jealousy had nothing to do with it.

"Oh," he said, "I almost forgot. We're invited to the Froelichs for dinner on Thursday."

2.

The Froelichs lived in a trailer. It was a nice trailer—double-wide, sitting on several acres of dry grassland about ten miles west of Porterville—but still it was a trailer, and as they approached it Thursday evening Claire wondered how Eddie, who had once been married to the richest and most glamorous woman in Kaweah

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County, felt about that, and concluded that it didn't improve his temper any.

Neither did a six-pack.

Eddie's "conversation" consisted of a running indictment of the people who had at various times dedicated their lives to sabotaging his success and happiness—a long list including but not limited to his father, his older brother, his high school basketball coach, and his present boss. And, of course, Glenda. The commentary became increasingly self-pitying and vitriolic as the empty Coors cans accumulated on the table. Sam listened with patient politeness—anything for a first-class shortstop—but Claire was passionately grateful for the interruption of a phone call at about nine. Mary Jo handed Eddie the phone, and as he listened, he seemed to shrink and sharpen like a slide coming into focus.

"Oh my God," he said huskily. "Did you call Bogosian? Okay, I'll be right there." He hung up, white-faced. Mary Jo touched his arm.

"That was Dwayne Patterson," he said numbly. "Two of his calves have died, and a third is sick. The vet thinks it's selenium poisoning."

Mary Jo laughed with relief. "Is that all? I thought your father—"

He whirled on her. "Don't you understand?" he hissed. "Those are the calves that I was treating!"

"Is this the selenium trial you were telling me about?" asked Sam, and Eddie nodded miserably.

"I have to get over there right away."

He accepted Sam's offer of company, and Claire and Sam squeezed into the front seat of the pickup. While Eddie drove with grim concentration, he told Claire about the experimental trials he was conducting with Dwayne Patterson's stock, testing the effect of administering selenium to calves and to their mothers.

"I thought selenium was poisonous!" Claire said.

"It is," Sam said, "in large amounts. But it's also necessary to normal growth, and supplemental injections can increase calf size and milk production. A blood count under—what was it, Eddie—?"

Eddie wasn't listening. "I've done it to dozens of cattle, with no problem," he said. "I couldn't have screwed up! Maybe my technician . . ." He trailed off, and Claire reflected sourly that Eddie's first response to a crisis always would be to find someone else to blame.

They drove south and west, through the little towns of Poplar and Tipley, where the soil was rich and the people poor, and a church seemed to be paired with every orchard: plums, First Missionary.

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Oranges, Western Baptist. Walnuts, First Nazarene. Almonds, First Assembly of God. Oranges again, Freewill Baptist. Feedlot, Church of God of the Prophecy. Feedlot . . . FEEDLOT! WHEW!

"Do people over here ever get used to the smell?" Claire said while holding her breath.

"Yeah," said Eddie, and, "I never have," said Sam.

Finally they came to the Kettleman Hills. Here the land was bone-dry, but fertile if irrigated. But water had to be bought from various projects at various prices, so people did what Dwayne Patterson had done: raised cattle, not crops.

Eddie turned up the long dirt road to the Lazy D Ranch, towards a brightly lit modern structure at the end of the road that resembled a hospital. When they entered, two men looked up from their hayside vigil. With his strong nose, silver-streaked black hair, and deep-set eyes, Armen Bogosian looked like a governor instead of a not-very-bright vet serving an obscure rural county, which was what he was.

Dwayne Patterson, on the other hand, could have been nothing but a rancher: big and capable-looking, eyes alert and humorous in a face weathered to manzanita red, he seemed ageless, but was probably in his mid-fifties. Claire liked him immediately—especially when he began talking in a rich Texas accent, slow as Kern County crude.

"Hey, Eddie," he said, coolly but without hostility. "Come see what we got here."

They knelt beside the limp brown animal. The calf didn't look good, even to Claire's ignorant eye; its hide was matted with sweat, its eyes open and glazed, and there was no rise and fall of respiration. All in all, Claire would have guessed that it was—

"Dead," said Bogosian. "Died a couple of minutes ago." He rose. "I've seen one or two cases of chronic selenium poisoning out in the Great Basin—"

"Used to have a fair amount in Texas," put in Dwayne. " 'Blind staggers,' we called it. But this ain't nothin' like that."

"Nope, these animals have the symptoms of acute poisoning. Never come across it before. Truth is," he added, "I probably wouldn't have diagnosed it so fast if Dwayne here hadn't told me about this experimental treatment."

"But are you sure that's what it is?" White-faced and perspiring, Eddie looked a lot like the calf.

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"Of course I'm sure," Bogosian said huffily. "I'll have to do a postmortem to look for the characteristic lesions, but the symptoms are all present: anorexia . . . polyuria . . . dyspnea . . . coma and death through respiratory and myocardial failure," he recited haltingly, reading from a fat blue book.

"Wayne, I swear I couldn't have hurt those calves," Eddie said pleadingly. "We've performed these trials on a hundred animals, and none of them has ever taken sick. . . ."

"Got much of this on your land, Patterson?" Sam interjected suddenly. He held up a trailing bit of greenery.

Patterson squinted at it. "Locoweed?" he said. "Sure, it's around, my stock gets into it sometimes. Never caused any problems. It ain't like the Texas variety."

Locoweed? Now what was the problem with locoweed? wondered Claire. Jimsonweed contained poisonous alkaloids, but all she could remember about locoweed was old wives', or rather old cowpokes', tales.

"This soil is selenium-poor," Eddie commented, further obscuring the issue as far as Claire was concerned. "That's why Dwayne called us in."

Sam nodded. "But locoweed on top of the supplemental selenium," he said tentatively, then snapped his fingers. "The pools!" he exclaimed. "The Westside drainage pools. Doesn't this land adjoin them?"

"Yeah, but I got fences—"

"Fences break."

"I'll bet that's it!" Eddie said, the color returning to his face. "Armen, can you find out what these critters have been eating?"

The vet shrugged. "Sure." Then, turning to Sam, "You want me to give you a call, too? You seem to be the botanical expert around here."

"I'd appreciate it. I'd be real interested."

They helped the vet load the calves' carcasses into his van. Patterson made them all come up to his house for coffee—"Least I can do after dragging you all out here for something that may have been my own damn fault"—and as he and Eddie walked on ahead, Sam finally explained the locoweed-selenium connection to Claire.

"*Astragalus*—that's the primary genus called 'locoweed'—is kind of mysterious," he said. "It seems to poison stock in a couple of ways, some of which aren't really understood. But one thing it can do is accumulate toxic elements from the soil. Like molybdenum—"

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"—or selenium," she guessed.

"Exactly. Some locoweeds are 'indicator' species; that means they're indicative of a seleniferous soil," he continued, happily sliding into pedantry, "and some are actually 'obligate,' meaning they'll *only* grow on selenium-rich soil."

"So what's growing around here?" She pointed to the locoweed Sam was still carrying.

"Oh, this is just plain old Spotted Loco, I think. Some variety of *Astragalus lentiginosus*—they're damn hard to identify."

"Oh."

"But that doesn't mean it can't be toxic. For all I know, even Spotted Loco can take up enough selenium to be dangerous, in certain environments."

"Like the drainage pools."

"Like the drainage pools."

"So it wasn't Eddie's fault after all," she said.

"Looks like it. But hey, nothing's ever Eddie's fault," Sam replied blandly, as they stepped into Patterson's living room.

Dwayne had his arm around a sweet-faced woman about half his size and, apparently, half his age. In her frilly bathrobe, glossy braid of hair hanging halfway down her back, she seemed to have stepped out of a Victorian daguerreotype.

"My wife Cheryl," he said tenderly; and when she emerged from the kitchen in a moment carrying mugs of coffee, he took the tray from her solicitously, saying, "I'll get that, honey."

Claire watched, touched, although she couldn't help but note that the attentiveness seemed to be all on Dwayne's side. Cheryl herself was silent, not sullen but . . . wooden. Without affect.

Old fool besotted by young wife, thought Claire wryly, though how Cheryl could resist that accent was beyond her. She would have married Patterson just to hear him talk; Sam's inherited Oklahoma twang was one of his most appealing features.

"Well, Eddie," Dwayne joked, "I was kinda hoping you all at the Station would *increase* my stock. Hell, I can knock 'em off myself!"

There was strained laughter. "Tough times for cattlemen," Sam said sympathetically.

"You bet." He settled back and took a sip of coffee. "To my way of thinking," he said reflectively, "American-bred beef's the best meal there is." His speech had a halting, rural rhythm, as if words were as scarce a resource as everything else. "But them Yuppies is all eating fish, or tofu, or some damn thing, fast-food places 're buyin'

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beef from Brazil . . . plus I got some built-in problems over here."

"Oh?"

"I'll give it to you in a word. Water," Dwayne said. "My natural forage here dries up in midsummer and then I gotta start buyin' feed or irrigate—'n my water rates is higher'n spit on a griddle."

"You're in the Westside Water District," Sam remarked, and Dwayne laughed.

"Yep. State water, from the Aqueduct. One hundred twenty an acre foot. Just my luck; right across the road they're gettin' federal water at twenty." Patterson sighed heavily. "I'm like one of them old wooly mammoths I seen in the tar pits down in L.A. Cain't turn no way at all." Claire felt enormous sympathy for him.

In the car on the way back, Eddie, garrulous with relief, actually managed to talk about something besides himself. Dr. Moreau meets Old MacDonald, thought Claire, listening to Eddie's descriptions of livestock bio-engineering. Cows that produced oceans of milk. Chickens that squeezed out eggs like rounds of ammunition for a few weeks, then died, completely depleted. Legless chickens. Tailless pigs.

"Tailless pigs?" echoed Claire.

"Yeah. See, cannibalism is a big problem with pigs when they're raised in confinement, and they always start with the tail."

While she digested, so to speak, this information, Eddie moved on to Dwayne Patterson.

"He's only owned the Lazy D for three years," he said. "Came from Texas. Had some kind of windfall there, that's how he came to buy it. He's a good manager, knows his stock, keeps up with new developments. The selenium treatment is a case in point . . . ordinarily," he finished, reddening. "But I'm afraid he's going to go under, even so."

On Saturday, Armen Bogosian called Sam to ask if he'd like to take a look at the contents of the dead calves' stomachs. Sam excitedly agreed, sounding as if he'd been offered a peek at the Mona Lisa instead of some slimy, partially digested weeds, but Claire decided she'd pass. He returned in an hour looking puzzled.

"Definitely not any of the varieties of Spotted Loco I'm familiar with," he declared, slapping his *Flora of California* down on the table. "I have a feeling it may be *Astragalus hornii;* they call it 'sheep loco,' which suggests that it's toxic, and the habitat fits—'alkaline soil, sometimes about desiccating pools or on lake shores,' " he quoted. "What I need to do now is go over to the drainage pools

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and see if I can find it in some area where Patterson's stock might have got at it—" He stopped suddenly.

Claire regarded him with resignation. She was leaving tomorrow, and they had agreed that they would spend the day together in romantic pursuits, not tramping around some desolate marshland keying out native plantlife.

"Why don't we drive over to the nature preserve?" she said brightly.

He looked at her suspiciously, trying to divine if this was a genuine offer or a trap. "You really wouldn't mind?"

"No. I've never seen that part of the Valley—" She halted. He was grinning at her.

"Tell you what," he said, pulling her towards him. "Why don't we drive over in about an hour?"

"An hour? Think you can stand it? How about five minutes?"

"No, an hour sounds about right. Maybe two." He paused. "Actually"—kissing her neck—"I'll check it out while you're gone."

3.

Sam eased onto the San Diego Freeway, slammed on the brakes as a Mercedes cut in front of him, and cursed absent-mindedly. His relief at this moment almost overwhelmed his distaste for L.A. and his churning impatience with the traffic; he had been dreading this day and now it was done. Claire was on the plane, headed for Boston, and in the hands of Fate.

It was not that he couldn't do without her for three weeks. In fact, he was sort of looking forward to an orgy of botanical walks, frozen pizzas, and dumping of clothes on the floor, not to mention pure solitude, which he missed. But—Boston. He had never been there, and he regarded it with unmitigated suspicion; from Boston Claire had simply appeared one day, and by Boston she might as easily be resorbed.

She had been back to visit once and had stayed for almost two months. He had accepted the fact that he was never going to see her again. Not that he had been unprepared; the place seemed to be filled with old boyfriends of unimaginable sophistication and sex appeal, old friends of matchless wit, work far more glamorous and prestigious than what the Citrus Cove Experimental Field Station could offer. So he had been very sad but unsurprised.

But then she had come back, and he had been happy but completely mystified.

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An exit sign caught his eye and involuntarily he glanced to his right. He had told himself he wasn't going to think about this, but Terry and Shannon were right up that road, right there in Sherman Oaks—and entirely beyond his reach. It wasn't "his time," not for another month yet. He got to see them twice a year as long as Debby didn't make trouble, and otherwise missed them with a depth of feeling he hadn't known he possessed.

North on I-5; a giant amusement park loomed off to the left. Teenagers by the carful were lined up at the exit ramp, avid for the ecstatic release of the Tidal Wave or the Tornado or the Death Wish, or whatever it was. He could see their eager faces and imagined a hot white flare of adrenaline above each one, like gas burning off in an oilfield. Kids that age were like oil or some other explosive natural resource, pumping hormones into the culture. Even his own still-prepubescent boys were absolutely fearless.

He had been fearless once. Oh, he had wanted a lot he didn't have—Glenda Cannon, for instance—but he had been without fear because he had believed he had nothing to lose. Then he had begun to lose things. His father, in high school. Then his mother. His best friend Frank, in the war. Debby and the kids—not dead, but lost to him, and he had grieved for the boys as if they had died.

And now there was Claire. He was coming to accept on faith that she loved him, but it made him uneasy. He was a scientist; he might act on faith, but he trusted in reason.

So now he seemed to operate against this constant background of low-level anxiety. What if something happened to the boys? What if Debby tried to keep them from him? What if Claire just didn't come back one day? More to the point, what if his old Valiant, which he had nursed for fifteen years and which was right now overheating dangerously, didn't make it over the Tejon Pass this time?

He grimaced in disgust. This was maturity—trading that fierce ache of adolescent desire for a cold knot of fear and self-pity. It was pathetic.

The Valiant made it, the country around him opened up and cleared out, and by the time he had coasted down the Grapevine into the San Joaquin Valley he was feeling a lot better. The sight of new-leaved cotton fields and vineyards cheered him; he was heir to a long line of people who had attempted to induce the earth to bring forth. One of the most upsetting things about cities was the use of land merely as a platform. It struck him as a perversion. Especially L.A., where the conversion was so recent. You could see

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it in the place names—"Orange Grove Avenue," meaning, there used to be an orange grove here.

But even in the Valley there were, as always, the new "For Sale—Zoned Commercial" signs on productive parcels, especially as he neared Bakersfield. Didn't they understand, he thought with something close to panic, that once you built a highway, or a high-rise, or a shopping mall, the decision was irrevocable, the land irredeemable—so compacted it could never bear again?

Suddenly his own righteous indignation amused him. Another sign of age: every change was for the worse.

He passed the turn-off for McMinnville and EastWind Farm—"Stallions at Stud, Horses for Sale, Glenda Cannon, Proprietor"—and that distracted him for a while. Soon the road signs showed the pockmarks of bullet holes, legacy of some long-ago wild Saturday night, and he knew he was almost home. It was past nine-thirty when, drained and stiff, he rolled up the drive to his house.

Hoping for some cool evening air, he opened a beer and walked out onto the porch, but it was still hot and humid. It felt like Thailand. Maybe the climate had changed for good. He would become Extension Advisor for Opium; they would start growing bamboo and teak down the hill, instead of cotton and grapes.

4.

Monday was still muggy and overcast and the weather was the main topic of conversation at the Station. Not idle talk, either—atypical weather could ruin a crop. Stone fruit were his concern, and while a little spring rain might seem a blessing to some, to him it meant increased risk of leaf curl, brown rot, crown rot. He needed to make a couple of visits to local growers to inspect their trees for problems—but first he was going to drive to the drainage pools and look for Sheep's Loco.

He parked under the sign for the nature preserve headquarters and began to walk west along the barbed wire that marked the boundary with Lazy D land to the south.

The first mile was open and dry. He stayed as close to the fence as possible, stopping to examine the tough, drought-tolerant plants that would look exactly the same months from now when the tender green carpet of filaree and wild oats under his feet had turned stiff and yellow. So far no locoweed.

Then he passed a feathery tamarisk, and just beyond saw a low mass of lavender, irregular blossoms. Locoweed, for sure, though

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color and size suggested they were benign Spotted Loco, not Sheep's Loco.

Closer inspection confirmed this: *lentiginosus* variety *variabilis*, he thought. What he wanted was a bigger, rangier-looking plant, with three- or four-foot-long stems. The flowers would be more white or yellow, but Sheep's Loco wasn't supposed to bloom until June. Too bad it was only spring, because the seedpods would be a dead giveaway: in both species inflated like little sausages, but in Spotted Loco a distinctive mottled purple—thus its common name—and containing papery valves that curved inward to form a septum, so that in cross-section the pod had two cells.

He chased after several likely looking specimens that proved to be oversized Spotted Loco that hadn't yet begun to bloom. Suddenly a wall of rushes appeared a few hundred yards to the north, and beyond them gleamed a drainage pool. Here by the fence there was no standing water, but the ground was saturated by seepage. Soon he was sinking in up to his ankles with every step and sweating like a hog in the sticky air; still, this was exactly where a calf might have wandered into the preserve, attracted by the pond itself and the luxuriant foliage around it, so he slogged on, checking for broken barbed wire on his left and locoweed on his right.

He saw both simultaneously. A section of newly strung wire testified to an old break, and about twenty feet north of it a stand of locoweed started his heart beating faster.

These were definitely different from anything else he had looked at: branches almost twice as long, flowers-to-be clumped in a dense flower-spike rather than a loose raceme. Now if he could just find a dried pod from last year . . . ah! Here!

He took out his Swiss Army knife and delicately sliced through the brittle balloon. It was completely hollow—one-celled, with no evidence of a septum. Sheep's Loco, he was almost positive!

In fact, all the locoweed in the muck edging the pool seemed to be Sheep's Loco. Evidently it had found a niche for itself here; the Spotted Loco seemed to prefer the higher, drier areas. But had Patterson's calves grazed here? Well, those round impressions in the mud looked like the hoofprints of cattle. And several branches of the locoweed appeared to have been gnawed and stripped by leathery bovine tongues. Hell, it was good enough for him.

He snipped a few leaflets and a flower-spike, out of long habit taking no more than was necessary for definite ID. Then, realizing

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that he should get a bioassay to test for selenium, he broke off a long branch. It had a pungent, bitter odor.

His field calls ended in the southeast part of the county, and on his way home he detoured towards Dwayne Patterson's land. He cut west through the oilfields, holding his breath against the sulfurous fumes, and then headed north on the McMinnville road, which formed the eastern boundary of the Lazy D.

About a quarter of a mile along the road, he saw a patch of locoweed along the shoulder and pulled off. Beyond the barbed wire a few crow-black cattle watched him fixedly as he examined the stuff briefly. He was pretty expert by now, and it was clearly Spotted Loco. Which was not to say there was no Sheep's Loco anywhere on Patterson's land, but he thought he could make a strong argument for the calves having browsed up by the drainage pools—in other words, he could save Eddie Froelich's ass.

He looked up at the sound of a motor, and in a moment a blue Ford 250 pickup stopped about twenty yards away and Dwayne Patterson stepped out. Sam stood, dusted his hands on his jeans, and called a greeting.

"Howdy. Just checking out your indigenous flora."

Patterson approached with his rolling cowboy gait and stopped beside him, staring down at the locoweed. "So this is what them poor little beasts ate, huh?"

"Close. It was a different species, though. There's a type of locoweed over at the nature preserve that's bigger and has flowers in sort of a—a ball, instead of strung out along a branch like this, and pods that aren't speckled . . ." He trailed off. Patterson's eyes had begun to glaze over in a familiar way. "Ever see anything like that on your land?" he finished hopelessly.

Patterson replied, inevitably, that hell, they all looked alike to him. "Fixed a break in my fence along the north boundary, though," he remarked, then added, "I guess you got to know this plant stuff for your work."

"Well, up to a point. It's kind of a hobby, too."

"Hobby," Patterson repeated thoughtfully, by mere inflection suggesting that a hobby was a sinful extravagance when there were calves to be fed and fences to be mended and work to be done eighteen hours a day, six days a week. And on the Sabbath we rested and thanked Him for our meager and joyless lives; Sam could hear his

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father's voice, harsh, weary, but insistent, like a rasp on hard wood . . .

He was lost in reverie for a few seconds. When he looked up, Patterson was grinning, and for a wild instant Sam imagined that Dwayne not only *saw* the painful memory he had evoked but had in fact deliberately conjured it up, like a redneck—who was that guy—Mephistopheles, *and* was enjoying it.

But when Patterson began to talk, the jovial Good Ol' Boy was back.

"Guess you prob'ly know that locoweed's mighty peculiar stuff," he said. "Most stock'll stay away from it, but I've known some animals to develop a taste for it. Dumb critters'll seek it out even though it's poisoning them."

Sam gave a distracted reply. Suddenly eager to be free of Patterson's company, he mumbled something about the office and made his escape.

Driving towards the Station, he reflected on that moment of revulsion. Not the kind of thing he usually experienced. He liked Patterson well enough, though as a lover of native flora he did harbor a mild prejudice against grazing and thus against cattlemen in general . . .

Well, it was deeper than that: he felt queasy about the whole enterprise of cattle ranching. There was a certain brutal pragmatism to rearing stock, a willingness to do anything necessary to maximize profit, that made him uneasy; he believed there had to be rules, even if you were raising an animal for food. But what were they? And what did it do to a person to treat sentient beings as a crop?

He had never been able to answer these questions, and at some level distrusted people like Dwayne who appeared to have done so—or more likely had never considered them.

All of which was hypocritical as hell. He enjoyed a burger as much as the next man, as long as he didn't think too much about it. As a matter of fact, he himself had raised a calf once, for 4-H—though he clearly had not been cut out for it. For despite his stern resolve to maintain a professional distance, and his father's admonitions that it wasn't a pet but an investment that was destined for the feedlot in Poplar as soon as the county fair was over—he had ended up loving it anyway.

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But Christ, how could you not love a fuzzy baby animal with big brown eyes that you had fed and brushed and nursed and talked to for a year? What had his parents been thinking of? Wanted to make a man out of him, he supposed; well, now he was a man, and he would never forget that trip to Poplar, and he would never encourage his kids to take on a similar project. Not that he had much opportunity to encourage them to do anything.

He arrived at the office at six o'clock and was finishing up the day's paperwork when the phone rang. A female voice spoke.

"I'm trying to reach Sam Cooper."

"You got him," he said airily—and then froze. He knew that voice, its compelling huskiness, its imperiousness . . .

"Hello, Sam. This is Glenda Cannon."

"Hello, Glenda. What can I do for you?" he replied after a pause, forcing himself to utter the cordial formula when what he wanted to say was, What do you want now?

But after all, they were a little old for him to do her chemistry homework for her. The time when he had run errands, tuned up her car, served as a marginally respectable and neuter escort between real boyfriends, and otherwise allowed himself—no, begged—to be thoroughly exploited, was long past. Long past.

"Sam," she was saying, "I need your help."

Resignedly he propped his feet on his desk and answered, deliberately obtuse. "I don't handle horses, Glenda. Let me transfer you to our livestock expert—"

"This isn't professional," she interrupted impatiently. "It's personal."

He waited. Eventually she continued, "It's these letters, Sam. Anonymous letters. I've been getting them for a while and I sort of ignored them. But I just got another one, and it . . . it's a little scary . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Glenda," he said politely, suppressing the protective reflex she jerked in him—still, after twenty years. And she knew it, too. But why the hell was she telling him this? "Have you called the police?"

"No." There was a long pause. "The thing is," she went on, "I have a feeling that it's Eddie."

Ah.

"And in spite of what he thinks, I don't especially want to get him into trouble. And since you and I used to be . . . so close, well, you'd

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be doing us both a favor if you'd just talk to him."

So close, he thought acidly, remembering how he had once vibrated for days after accidentally brushing her left breast as he helped her into the car. "Glenda, I appreciate that, but I really think you ought to go to the police—"

"NO!" she said swiftly. "Not yet. That's what I did when we broke up, and it just made things worse, it infuriated him!"

She really did sound scared. He felt himself start to weaken.

"I don't have anybody else, Sam," she was saying. "And we were so close when we were kids . . ."

That was twice she had used that phrase. If he had ever seen *Casablanca* he might have said, "I wouldn't bring up high school if I were you, it's bad strategy." Or, "Cut the crap, Glenda, we had a sick adolescent relationship based on my sexual frustration and your convenience." Or merely, "I've had a long day, Glenda, get to the point."

In fact, being the well-brought-up, chivalrous, repressed American male he was, he just sat silently and thought very bad thoughts about Glenda Cannon. And eventually he realized that *that* Glenda was gone, gone these twenty years, gone as irrevocably as his sixteen-year-old self. And presently he heard himself say:

"What do you want me to do?"

Just an old talking doll whose string has been pulled once again, he thought disgustedly, listening.

5.

Barney Cannon had left his daughter about a hundred acres of prime pastureland west of Parkerville, south of McMinnville. Most of the western portion of it was now probably leased to other ranchers; Glenda was not interested in cattle. But set in the northeast corner, like an emerald in a haybale, was the twenty-acre parcel called EastWind Farm.

EastWind had always looked more like an artist's conception of a ranch than a working operation. Its perfectly white, straight fences enclosed lush, uniformly verdant fields (thanks to cheap federal water) where gamboled the Arabians, dainty but strong. Like Glenda herself.

But as Sam drove up the oleandered drive on Tuesday he noticed a few flaws in Xanadu. The horses were as sleek as ever, but a broken railing by the entrance was sloppily patched and stringy weeds wrapped themselves around fence posts. He passed the modest

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brick ranch house—luxury was reserved for the horses—and pulled up in front of the stables, where a window had been boarded up with plywood.

That broken window would have been replaced immediately in Barney's day, he mused, getting out of the car. But then Barney had been dead for three years now. He wondered just how well Glenda and EastWind were doing without Daddy to fall back on.

The stables seemed to be bereft of human life, although several horses whinnied and stamped in their stalls. An intense, familiar aroma permeated the place: hay—no attar of roses but plain old alfalfa; horse manure—definitely the ordinary variety; horse urine, horse dander . . . he sneezed violently.

Damn.

Sam had not lied to Claire: he could ride perfectly well. He had learned young; all his little friends rode, and dreamed of rodeos and roundups. But his own cowboy aspirations had been squelched around age eleven when it became humiliatingly clear that he was acutely allergic to horses. Not to the animals themselves, perhaps, but to their by-products, and their whole way of life. Out on the trail he was fine, but as soon as he entered a barn . . .

He sneezed again and was fumbling for a Kleenex when a brusque "What do you want?" interrupted him. A teenage girl was regarding him suspiciously over the top of a stall door that said "Barney's Pride"; her broad face was freckled and her reddish hair drawn back in a ponytail, and from the haze of dust settling behind her, it seemed that she had just mucked out the stall.

"Hi," Sam said, backing away from the lethal cloud. "I'm supposed to meet Glenda here at two. I'm Sam Cooper."

"She's out riding," Ponytail said in a hostile voice and turned back to her task. Sam walked back outside and settled onto a barrel; he was not a vain man, but he would just as soon have his nose stop dripping before Glenda showed up.

He had waited ten minutes and was starting to feel irritated when there was a thunder of hooves, a flash of white mane and gold hair, and Glenda rounded the barn and galloped straight towards him.

Well, he knew this game. He sat relaxed and unflinching, and at the last moment she pulled up five feet in front of him, slid off, and called commandingly, "PEGGY!" Ponytail came hurrying out of the barn and Glenda handed her the reins.

"Cool him down, I rode him pretty hard. Didn't want to keep Sam waiting," she said with a grin in his direction that seemed to

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intensify the girl's sulkiness; she glared at him as she led the horse away.

Glenda pulled off her gloves and extended her hand.

"Howdy, Sam. How are you? You're looking good," she added with a frank glance that momentarily stripped away his composure. His face grew hot and his gaze shifted to his feet. He reminded himself that in the years since Glenda he had slept with a number of women quite successfully, had gained no weight and lost no—almost no—hair, and in fact probably looked better than usual since he was wearing a shirt Claire had bought him. He passed a hand over the soft material, obscurely reassured.

Neutrally he responded, "You're looking good too," which was expected but true. Breathtakingly true. He had thought she might have begun to erode, like EastWind—it had been impossible to tell what lay under the mask of makeup she had worn during the Rodeo Parade—but she looked great: taut, trim, tan, a little weathered, but all the more appealing for it. Her face, with its high cheekbones, slanting eyes, and delicate mouth, had been kittenish in youth. Now it was truly beautiful.

"Well," she said after this moment of mutual appraisal, "I sure do appreciate your coming out, Sam. Let's go into the tack room; I've got the letters in there. Wait a minute"—she sat on the barrel recently vacated by Sam—"let me get out of these boots."

In an instant Peggy materialized. "I'll do it, Glenda," she said, kneeling at her feet in an attitude of adoration more abject than the act required. Pubescent hero-worship? wondered Sam. Or something more? Whatever the emotion, it probably explained her ill will towards him.

He followed Glenda down the length of the barn, struck by how small she suddenly was. He had forgotten that; on her white stallion she was an Amazon, and riding boots gave her height, but actually she was very petite. Back in high school, in that era of exaggerated gender differences, he had found her doll-like diminutiveness adorable, but now . . . he was six foot one, and Claire was tall and long-limbed, and he liked that, he realized with something like relief. With Glenda he would feel like a child molester—

"Got a cold?" she asked, looking back. He had sneezed.

He hesitated. "Yeah," he said finally.

They entered the tack room, which was like a bunkhouse without the bunks: a potbellied stove, a cot in the corner, saddles, bridles, boots, and other horsey paraphernalia strewn about. Next to the

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door was a big oak roll-top desk, piled high with papers. Sam picked one up at random; it was a vet's bill, second notice: "Is there some reason why you haven't responded . . . ?"

The letters were locked in the top drawer of the desk. There were five of them, printed in the completely anonymous typeface of a dot-matrix printer: so much for typewriters with "e"s out of alignment and letters snipped from the *London Times*. Perched on the corner of the desk, Sam held the letters gingerly and opened them one by one.

The first two were merely mildly pornographic, suggesting nothing that Sam hadn't imagined himself once upon a time, and he was uncomfortably aware of Glenda watching him expressionlessly. The third was longer, and slightly sadistic. But the last was different: three ominous words in the middle of the page.

I'VE HAD ENOUGH.

"Since I broke up with Eddie," she said, "I've gotten letters twice." She hesitated. "Both times, I was going out with somebody. He seemed to know, somehow. No matter how discreet I was. But this time—I don't know what set him off."

"Did he ever threaten you before?" By now it was tacitly accepted that they were talking about Eddie Froelich.

"In the letters, you mean? No. But when we were married he used to . . . to knock me around occasionally. Nothing serious." She smiled wryly. "Nothing broken."

Oh, of course. Of course Eddie would "knock around" women. He was a bully and a whiner, and Sam felt his face flush with anger.

But then why was she protecting him? Was it possible, after all this, that she still loved him? Had she ever loved him? He had always wanted to believe that she hadn't, but knew very well his feelings about her couldn't be trusted.

"What do you want me to do?" he said, once again expressing the motif of their relationship.

"Just talk to him. See why he's so angry all of a sudden—or—or if you think it's not him after all, then tell me. I trust your judgment. I've always trusted you, Sam," she said, suddenly earnest.

His simultaneous translator was telling him, Yeah, she always trusted you—her loyal eunuch. Glenda always needs someone around to muck out the stalls and take her boots off. But part of him was saying, Give her a chance, people change.

She was talking, quietly, as if to herself. "I think I've just learned to value that kind of friendship in the last few years. Since Barney died."

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She stopped abruptly, and closed her eyes. "Oh God, Sam," she exclaimed passionately, "I miss my father so much!"

There was a long silence. "I'll talk to Eddie," he promised, rising and holding out his hand.

On the way home he realized that he had better start thinking about another shortstop.

Dutifully he called Eddie, who sounded pathetically eager to meet for lunch; loneliness or, most likely, the nightly six-pack kicking in. He assumed the reason was softball and Sam didn't correct him. He hung up, reflecting that whatever had attracted Glenda to Eddie, it obviously hadn't been quick wit. On the other hand, he was pretty smart on a baseball diamond, so maybe he was smart in bed too. He dropped that idea in a hurry.

He stayed up late catching up on some reading for work. By eleven he gave up on the idea that Claire might call.

They had agreed that *she* would call *him;* she was going to be on the move, didn't know where she would be from day to day. Which made sense, but also made him the one to sit by the phone and wait. Why did he still feel like she had him on probation? Why did he only fall in love with women who could hurt him?

But then he could hurt Claire, too. He hadn't believed that for a long time, but now he knew it was true. Mutually assured destruction: each had the power to wound the other and refrained, for the most part, from exercising it.

In his marriage he had held all the power, had carefully chosen someone, in fact, whom he didn't love too much. And no matter that he had never abused that power, that he had been unfailingly kind and faithful—they both knew the score, he and Debby. And so she had finally turned to someone who needed her.

He had felt so guilty he hadn't even contested the custody settlement—and now, by God, he was paying for that.

6.

The heart of Parkerville was rotting despite every lame stunt the city council could think up to reverse the process. Increasingly, commerce was conducted at the malls that straggled along, and defined and enlarged, the city's perimeter. More change for the worse, thought Sam grumpily as he pulled into the mini-mall comprised of Fred's Western Wear, Parkerville Rainbow House of Carpets, the Safeway, and the McDonald's. Eddie's pickup was already there.

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Half an hour later Eddie wiped the McDonald's Special Sauce from his mouth with the back of his hand, stood up, and said sincerely, "I'd like to smash your nose. Teach you to keep it where it belongs!"

Sam considered this statement. Eddie probably didn't have the edge on him that he had had in high school, but still he was a natural fighter; he had that reservoir of explosive rage that he could tap in an instant. Yes, he decided, Eddie could probably break his nose. He clenched his hands, just in case he couldn't talk himself out of this.

The conversation had begun amicably enough, with anecdotes from high school, the war, and the softball team, but relations had disintegrated when Sam had cautiously introduced the matter of the letters. When he understood what was being said, Eddie had snarled, "Still Glenda's little dog. I thought you'd gotten over that, Sam. But then maybe nobody gets over Glenda."

"Speak for yourself," Sam had retorted, stung. "She asked me to do her a favor, that's all—and you too, as a matter of fact. She could have gone straight to the police and you'd be under investigation right now. That probably wouldn't sit well with your boss!"

Temporarily chastened, Eddie had admitted, "No, probably not, on top of the Patterson fiasco. I'd probably be selling lawn mowers at Kavoian's." After a pause he had burst out, "But why? Why doesn't she ever— I mean, if she really believes I'm sending these letters, why doesn't she go to the police?"

"Who knows? Maybe she feels guilty about the divorce," Sam had replied. "And maybe," examining his tangle of greasy fries, "she still cares for you."

Startled and then slightly dreamy expressions had flitted across Eddie's face before it settled back into its customary resentful lines. But in that instant Sam was sure—almost sure—that Eddie had sent the letters. To see what she would do, to keep her from seeing other men, to stay connected to her somehow. He was desperate and pitiable, and also, possibly, dangerous.

"Glenda don't care for nobody but Glenda," Eddie had said sullenly. "Especially now that Barney's dead. But I didn't write those letters," he had continued hotly. "And I'd still like to know why you volunteered to be her errand-boy."

Sam had shrugged. "A favor, like I said." He hesitated. "She seemed really alone."

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"Alone?" Eddie had shouted with laughter. "Listen, sucker, Glenda's never alone! Don't swallow that Poor-Little-Rich-Girl bullshit."

It was at this point that his face got very red and he declared his desires regarding Sam's nose. Now he drained his thick shake noisily, which seemed to cool him off, and added, "Except that I owe you something for saving my butt at Patterson's."

Well, no blood on the Formica today, thought Sam with mixed relief and disappointment; he had sort of wanted to take a crack at that arrogant mug . . .

"But you run back to Miss Glenda," Eddie was saying, "and you tell her that if she's got accusations to make, she can call me herself!"

Sam drove slowly back to the Station. If Eddie was telling the truth about the letters, he was probably telling the truth about Glenda, too, and he, Sam, was once again her willing patsy in some self-serving scheme. On the other hand, if Eddie was lying about the letters, he was probably wrong about Glenda. Naturally Sam favored this interpretation; he wanted to trust Glenda.

He had never exactly liked Eddie. He had just known him all his life—and competed with and envied him. He, Sam, had been a solid hitter and a better-than-good outfielder on their high-school team; Eddie had been a star. He had come back from the war happy merely to have survived; Eddie had come back a hero for having committed some stupid and totally unnecessary act, probably in the throes of a tantrum. Sam had married an attractive, nice, and reasonably intelligent woman; Eddie had married Glenda.

But that was in the past. Now Eddie was completely ordinary. Sub-ordinary, in fact; leaving aside the matter of the letters, he was still a jerk, full of self-pity, rude to his wife, hard on his kids—

Yeah, but at least he had his kids.

A sharp pain in his neck made him realize that he had been hunched forward over the steering wheel for some time, straining to see through a glaze of water; it was raining again.

The rain let up by midafternoon but, nevertheless, Sam decided to cancel the season's first softball practice, which had been scheduled for that evening. He couldn't afford to have his rather elderly players—mean age around thirty-five—slipping on a wet field and spraining ankles.

Last season there had been a moment when he had finally realized

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that he wasn't going to become a better player. Up until then he had carried in the back of his mind the childish notion that he was still approaching some zenith of perfection, in everything, not just ball; that he was still a kid who was going to become bigger and faster and stronger and smarter and more attractive to women. Ridiculous! Almost forty years old!

Well, with no softball practice he could allow himself dinner. But first he stopped at Kavoian's Feed and Supply in Parkerville; he needed to talk to their Pest Management Advisor.

He threaded his way through the aisles of western wear and found a young woman arranging bolo ties on a rack.

"Martinez around?"

"I'll check in the back."

While he waited he idly flipped through the sealed packets of western shirts. A lot of his friends wore this cowboy crap. He could never see the point. Boots, yes; jeans, yes; they were functional—if you really were riding a horse, not a desk chair—but these shirts. What was so important about having snaps instead of buttons?

Someone had come up beside him and was also leafing through the piles of shirts. He glanced over his right shoulder. Short, sturdily-built, red ponytail—it was Peggy.

Oblivious to him, she pulled out two shirts, looked at them uncertainly, and finally settled on a fancy number in blue plaid, shot with silver threads and decorated with curlicued stitching.

"That'll look nice with your hair," Sam remarked. Startled, she looked up and took a moment to place him. Then she flushed a dark red, so that her freckles disappeared.

"It's for Glenda," she muttered, and scuttled to the counter.

This happened to be where Sam was headed too, and he strolled along behind her. He was curious about Peggy.

"Well, it'll look nice with Glenda's hair, too," he pursued. "How long have you worked for her?"

"I . . . I don't exactly work for her . . . " she said, clutching the shirt to her bosom like a shield, "that is, she just lets me help out sometimes. After school, and on weekends."

"For free?" he asked, trying to keep the incredulity out of his voice.

"It's a wonderful opportunity," she said defensively. "I'm sort of an apprentice; I get to learn everything about the business. Glenda knows so much . . ."

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Oh, yeah, she knows things you and I will never learn, he thought. Like how to exploit a teenage crush; she wrote the book on that.

John Martinez appeared behind the counter, and with mutual relief Sam and Peggy turned to their separate business.

At Konnie's Koffee Kup, Monday was spaghetti with meatballs, Tuesday was barbecued beef, Wednesday breaded veal cutlet, Thursday ham and biscuits, Friday fried chicken, and Saturday prime rib. On Sunday, the bachelors, widowers, and otherwise single men for whom Konnie's was home had to fend for themselves.

Even breaded veal cutlet was better than scrambled eggs for the third night in a row, so Sam wandered into Konnie's around seven o'clock. To his surprise, he caught sight of Tom Martelli's baby blues above a half-eaten Konnie Burger.

"Marie throw you out?" He plopped down on the stool next to him.

"Naw, she took the kids up to Fresno to visit her folks. She left some stuff in the freezer for me, but the house is kind of quiet," Tom said sheepishly.

"Mmmm." His cutlet arrived, a pale gray object in a sea of shoe-polish-brown gravy, and he eyed it unhappily. Why in God's name had he ordered veal? Especially in his present mood; images from undergraduate Animal Husbandry flitted through his mind—calves immobilized in cages for all of their miserable short lives, deliberately kept anemic to produce that milk-white meat the consumer, i.e., he, desired . . . well, this probably wasn't veal anyway; it was probably cow lips, or ears, or something, and in any case it was ninety percent breading . . .

He pushed the plate away from him. "Cathy," he called apologetically, "I guess I'm not as hungry as I thought. Could you bring me a chef's salad?"

"Stick with the burgers," Tom said wisely. "Stay away from the specials."

"Yeah. Listen, Tom, what would you do about anonymous letters?"

"Getting 'em? Or investigating 'em?"

"Investigating."

"Well, same thing I do about any other crime. A little talk, a little walk, a little forensics . . ." He looked at Sam curiously. "Somebody sending you pornographic postcards?"

"No, no, it's a friend . . . somebody at work."

"Female?"

"Yeah."

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"Obscene letters? Or threatening?"

"Both."

"Hmm. Probably an old boyfriend or ex-husband. I take it she hasn't talked to the police."

"Nope."

"Yeah, well, she probably knows who's sending them then. She should be careful. Old boyfriends and ex-husbands are a murderous bunch."

That certainly seemed to describe Eddie Froelich.

The phone was ringing when he pulled into his driveway. He took the stairs three at a time, burst through the door, and grabbed it—and was rewarded with the mindless buzz of a dial tone.

Damn. It was undoubtedly Claire—maybe she would try later.

She didn't.

Around four the next afternoon he stuck his head into Ray Copeland's office to say hello. Ray, the station manager, was staring at his desk with puckered brow and chewed lip. He was an extraordinarily kind man, much-loved, who drove his colleagues crazy.

His face cleared momentarily when he saw Sam. "How's bachelor life?"

"Okay," Sam said. "I could get to like it."

"Nora and I wondered if you'd like to come by for some home cooking. Any night."

"Thanks, Ray, I'd like that," he replied with special sincerity, remembering last night's meal. "Maybe next week?" His eyes fell on the *Parkerville Sentinel* lying on Ray's desk. "Is this today's?"

"Yeah. Take it if you haven't read it."

He took one look at the front page and bolted for his office.

"Drainage Pools Claim Two More Victims," the headline said. "Two purebred Arabian horses died last night, apparently after ingesting selenium-contaminated [illegible]ge near the Westside Nature Preserve. The horses were owned by Ms. Glenda Cannon of East-Wind Arabian Horse Ranch, fifteen miles southwest of Parkerville. A similar incident occurred last week when two calves owned by Dwayne Patterson of McMinnville evidently grazed near the drainage pools and later died. The nature preserve wetlands are known to contain selenium levels toxic to waterfowl, but this is the first time injury to stock has been reported. The county has requested the Bureau of Land Management, which manages the preserve, to investigate . . ."

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He called Glenda immediately.

"Yes, it's really sad, Sam." Her voice was hoarse. "Two of my geldings. They were insured, of course, but still, they were my babies. . . . Thank God it wasn't Barney's Pride or one of the mares. I couldn't have stood that. Or afforded it." She laughed grimly.

"Glenda, are you sure it was an accident?"

There was a pause. "What do you mean?"

"I mean are you sure that . . . somebody didn't just pump 'em full of selenium?"

"Oh no, Sam! There was a break in the fence on the north boundary, and Dr. Bogosian found traces of locoweed in their stomachs."

"Yeah, but those letters—"

"This had nothing to do with the letters, Sam," she said firmly. "It was an accident. The same thing happened to a rancher over here a few days ago . . . Peters, Peterson . . ."

"Patterson."

"Right, Dwayne Patterson. He called me this morning. There's some talk about bringing suit against the BLM."

Well, that might bring Dwayne some needed cash, thought Sam, and he said abruptly, "Patterson's ranch is due west of yours, isn't it? I mean, his land adjoins EastWind." Funny he hadn't realized that before.

"Not quite. We're separated by the McMinnville road."

He hung up and called Armen Bogosian to arrange to see these latest deadly specimens of locoweed.

"Kinda thought you might be interested," Bogosian said a half-hour later, indicating some shredded vegetation on a paper towel, "so I saved it. Looks just like what I took out of Patterson's calves, though."

Sam grunted noncommittally and tried to hide his dismay at the mash he beheld. The *astragalus* Bogosian had found in Patterson's calves had been relatively intact, but horses didn't store forage in their rumens for later enjoyment like cattle. This stuff was thoroughly masticated. How the hell was he going to identify it? Unless . . . He pulled out a hand lens and his knife and gently prodded a promising-looking fragment.

"Strange," he muttered, "all this stock going for locoweed when there's still good grass around."

"Yes, it is a little strange," Bogosian replied placidly.

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"I mean, especially Glenda Cannon's animals." He crouched over the paper towel. Was that a septum or just a piece of the hull? "Those horses are pampered like lap dogs. I'm sure they've never gone hungry longer than forty-five seconds in their lives!"

"Horses are funny animals," the vet said, chuckling inanely, as Sam straightened and glanced with irritation at his handsome, inexpressive face. Was the man stupid? Or just completely lacking normal human curiosity?

"How did you diagnose selenium poisoning?"

"Well, the symptoms were the same as Patterson's calves'. And I found the characteristic lesions, and I knew Miss Cannon's farm adjoins the nature preserve, like the Lazy D . . . Just put two and two together, I guess," he finished modestly.

Two and two. Well, he had an extra variable to add to the equation. He knew that this locoweed had pods that were *two*-celled, and therefore was Spotted Loco and therefore had probably not come from the drainage pools. And he would bet there was no selenium in it, either.

"Can I have these specimens, Armen? I'll take good care of them."

7.

Someone had poisoned Glenda's horses. He considered the possibility that the person responsible was not Eddie Froelich. The obvious suspect in any crime against Glenda was a spurned lover—or someone who had imagined himself a lover, or wished to be a lover—and that put Eddie right at the head of the list. But it was a long list, and included, technically, his own name; he wondered how many men nursed simmering resentment towards Glenda Cannon, and then remembered Peggy's sullen, worshipful face and corrected himself: "people," not "men." Glenda's appeal seemed to be universal, though he couldn't speak for her tastes.

Of course, unrequited lust was not the only motive for revenge, he thought, turning west and flipping down a visor against the late afternoon sun. Anyway, this might have nothing to do with revenge, or passion, or anger. Maybe his own emotions were distorting his judgment in this matter; maybe this was about money. There might be simple, cold, economic reasons for killing Glenda's horses.

Only he couldn't think of any at the moment.

No, Eddie was still his number-one draft pick.

He turned east into EastWind's drive. When he reached the stable it seemed deserted, but after a moment Peggy, red-eyed and dismal,

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emerged from an empty stall. Cleaning out the effects, he supposed.

"Hi, Glenda around?"

"She's somewhere," Peggy replied dully.

"This is a terrible thing."

"It's awful!" Peggy burst out, too distraught to remember she disliked him. "Glenda's so upset . . ."

That would be her first concern.

"Nice of you to drop by," said Glenda from behind him. "You can go now," she said offhandedly to Peggy, who obediently stacked her pitchfork against the wall. "I'll be back tomorrow," she called as she left. Glenda didn't bother to respond.

"I need to talk to you," he said, more curtly than he had intended; Peggy's doglike devotion cut a little too close to the bone. He told her about the locoweed.

"And I'm sure," he finished, "that a bioassay of those plants would show no selenium. Glenda, your horses were poisoned. And I think we both know by whom." This statement would have had greater dramatic effect if it had not been punctuated by an explosive sneeze.

"I don't believe it," she said flatly.

"How do you know that fence was broken?" he asked, groping for Kleenex.

"Joe Gutierrez saw it. He's worked for me for four years."

"Well, it's a coincidence, then. Or a deliberate attempt to mislead. Glenda, Eddie has access to selenium, and he knows how to use it. . . . I think you should call the police."

"NO!" she said vehemently, then continued in a more normal voice, "Look, I appreciate your concern, I really do, but Eddie loves those horses as much as I do. You'll just have to believe me, Sam. He would never do something like this. It was a—a tragic accident, that's all."

"All right, but I'm getting that locoweed assayed." When? Normally he could have asked Claire. "Monday, I'll get somebody on it Monday."

Glenda looked preoccupied. "Suit yourself," she said distractedly, and bent down to tug on a boot. When she rose her face was smooth and relaxed again. "Listen, I have a favor to ask. Another favor."

"Shoot."

"Come on into the tack room; it's a little more comfortable."

The tack room was hardly comfortable; it was dark and frigid, but at least the air was relatively dander-free and Sam could feel his

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nose start to clear. Glenda knelt by the wood-burning stove and began a fire, but the wood was green and smoked sourly. Patiently she fed it bits of kindling, coaxing it until a small bright flame rose up.

"Didn't expect to need this again till October," she remarked, echoing his thoughts about his car heater. When the wood started to crackle in earnest, she sat down on the cot and motioned for him to join her. He sat gingerly, keeping his distance.

"What's the favor?"

She didn't answer. Instead she tucked her feet under her and leaned back against the rough paneling. She was wearing the blue shirt that he had seen Peggy choose yesterday.

"I've been thinking a lot about you lately, Sam."

Her husky voice was pitched a little higher than usual, as if she were nervous.

"I've been recalling old times . . ." She trailed off, and then started to giggle. "Remember when I called you at three in the morning from East Parkerville to come and get me?"

Sam clasped his hands between his knees and stared down at his shoes. Sure, he remembered. She had been desperate, drunk, and incoherent; her date, in an alcohol-enhanced fit of sexual frustration (Sam's interpretation), had abandoned her in the middle of nowhere. Sam had snuck out of the house and taken the family car, found her shivering on a corner of the six-block stretch that was Parkerville's "tough" neighborhood, filled her full of black coffee, helped her crawl through her bedroom window—and left. What a chump.

"What a savior," Glenda was saying. "Daddy would've beat me black and blue, I swear he would."

Sam glanced at her, bemused by the tone of fond nostalgia of this last statement, and she finally caught his eye.

"You were good to me, Sam. Real good. In fact I—well, I've been wondering if I didn't make a mistake, letting you get away from me all those years ago." Ignoring his expression of polite disbelief, she added, "Hey, scoot over here next to me, it's cold in here."

"Glenda," he said mildly, speaking for the first time, "what the hell are you up to?" But he moved next to her.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, historically speaking, every time you're re-e-al nice to me you want something."

She stiffened and pulled away. "That's a hurtful thing to say."

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He knew that petulance so well. The old Glenda would now have demanded a half-hour of apologies to be civil again. But the new Sam resisted the tug of habit, and maybe Glenda had changed too. Because after a moment she settled back.

"Look, why don't you put your arm around me—there, that's better. You can't believe that all I want is . . . your company?"

"All of a sudden."

"All of a sudden."

"No, can't say as I believe it." But he had positioned his arm around her shoulders.

Glenda began speaking haltingly and softly. "I'm sorry if I ever mistreated you, Sam. It seems like all my life people have been trying to get something out of me, and I guess I thought that's how I was supposed to behave. But you—you've always been so gentle and so—so generous."

"Like a cocker spaniel," he heard himself say. Her voice was hypnotic.

"Like a friend," she replied. "Aw, Sam, kids are such fools. I always went for the show—the tight jeans and the strut." She laughed and brushed the hair away from her face. "I learned the hard way that they don't mean anything."

The room was warming and he was relaxing, letting the flow of her words wash over him, not trying to follow their sense. Images of high school—of Glenda—flooded his mind. Glenda sitting in front of him in History, her shiny hair flipped up like a wave of gold. Glenda walking down the hall towards him, wearing—he could see it vividly—a tight blue skirt, a soft blue sweater, and a string of pearls. Glenda in a white dress at the senior prom; by then he was dating Debby, but he was watching Glenda just the same. Glenda—

With a start he came back to the present. Glenda herself, in the flesh, seemed to be talking to him. "There's something I notice about a man," she was saying. "I can't explain it, but something tells me when he knows how to please a woman. And when I saw you at the rodeo the other day . . ." She tilted her head back and looked at him directly. "I always knew you were a sweetheart, Sam. But I just noticed you're a real sexy man."

He looked down at her lazily; his body was seated on the cot but his brain, apparently, was dangling in a corner with the bridles and bits and other hardware.

She reached up and undid his top button.

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Oh. Well, now he got it. Now he had it figured out. He was being seduced, he thought calmly, while his pulse rocketed from 60 to 220 minus his age. Seduced by Glenda Cannon twenty years too late. Sure, his sixteen-year-old self would have submitted to crucifixion for this, but now, *now* it meant nothing.

Nothing? The fire flickering and hissing, Glenda's shirt stretched across her breasts, the blood pounding in his head? That meant nothing?

Yes, well, what about Claire?

What about her? If she weren't off gallivanting in Boston doing God-knows-what with God-knows-who, he wouldn't be here, and horny.

Yeah, but what if Glenda was just jerking him around one more time?

What if she wasn't? And dammit, she owed him!

While he dithered, Glenda reached to unbuckle his belt.

Startled into roughness, he grabbed her wrist. "Don't mess with me, Glenda, I'm not sixteen anymore."

Her eyes widened. "Hell, no, you're definitely full-growed."

His brain was now completely out of the picture. He surged towards her. The snaps on her shirt popped open like tiny firecrackers —*that* was the point of the snaps!—her skin was warm and smooth and smelled of Ivory soap and sweet alfalfa and—and—

God DAMN!

"Sorry," he mumbled, and dove for her again—and sneezed again, three times in rapid succession, a multiple nasal orgasm.

He sat upright. Glenda was understandably mystified.

"It's this allergy," he said dismally. "It's—well, actually, I'm allergic to horses."

She pursed her mouth, suppressing laughter. Then she managed to look concerned.

"Is it the room? We could move to the house."

"No," he muttered. "No, the truth is, I think . . . I think it's your clothes. And maybe . . . your hair, too," he added awkwardly. His shame was complete.

Glenda blinked and gave him a hard stare. Her hair? Her glorious golden hair? Then she graciously rose to the occasion.

"You stay right there—I'll run over to the house and take a shower, I won't be five minutes. Now don't you move, darlin'!" And she whisked herself away.

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There was something jarringly professional about that "darlin' " but it was lost in a nightmare of lust and embarrassment. He groaned and fell face forward on the cot, noting with passing interest that he hadn't outgrown the capacity to be abysmally, absolutely humiliated. Forever young, that was him.

After a couple of minutes of no Glenda, his brain began cranking up like an old rusty generator. He began to think. And the first thing he thought about was Claire.

Could he do this without completely screwing things up with her? They had never promised fidelity, but it was a tacit rule of their relationship—at least he assumed it was.

Well, put it another way. Could he do this and not let Claire know?

Maybe. Possibly. But it was a moot question, because this was the culmination of twenty years of daydreaming and he sure as hell wasn't going to let it get away!

Was he?

If he was so all-fired eager to have sex with Glenda, why had it taken him so long tonight to figure out what she wanted? He wasn't stupid. Was it his natural modesty? His long history of thwarted desire?

Or was it that he knew, fundamentally, that Glenda was lying?

He tried to be logical. It wasn't impossible that Glenda had succumbed to his manly charms—some remarkably attractive women had fallen for him over the years; he didn't understand it, but there it was, it was data, it couldn't be ignored. On the other hand—

On the other hand came another memory of Glenda, most unwelcome, repressed for twenty years.

It would have been eleventh grade or so, and he had taken her home. And Barney Cannon was breeding a mare; that is, someone had brought a mare to be serviced by the Cannons' purebred stallion.

Only they didn't just let the stallion have at her; oh no, old Al Sharif or whatever its name was might have been injured, and anyway, at four hundred dollars a pop this activity was too expensive to leave to nature. No, they had tethered the mare, led over some less illustrious drone of a stallion, let him mount her—roped, a man on either side of him—and just before the climactic moment had hauled him off. Then, when the mare was hot and ready, Al Sharif had deigned to perform.

It had been an excruciating experience for Sam. Not because of the robustly sexual nature of the proceedings—he was a farm boy,

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after all—but because he had identified so strongly with that pitiful, eternally frustrated stallion-without-a-name, and because he had been afraid to look over towards Glenda and see her watching him and smiling, knowing exactly what was going through his head.

That was how Glenda had thought of him. Could she have changed so much? He didn't believe it. She didn't want him. When two people really wanted each other it was undeniable, inexorable, like a fire laid with dry wood; each person's heat reflected and intensified until both ignited. Well, he knew how that felt, and this wasn't it; like the woodstove, he had been prodded expertly into flame. He was burning, but he was burning alone.

He should have guessed, he thought bitterly, his passion turning to anger—if his gonads hadn't taken over, he would have guessed—that once again he was some bit player in one of her Byzantine intrigues, a line item on her private agenda. They would have sex, he would feel beholden, he would do what she wanted; that was the syllogism.

Glenda was standing in the doorway wrapped in a satin robe.

"Better?" she asked lightly. Her damp hair curled around her neck and the silky material flowed over her nipples and he watched, mesmerized, as her hands moved slowly to her sash.

Oh, Jesus. If she opened that robe he was done for.

"Glenda!" he croaked. She looked at his face and seemed to droop a little.

"Changed your mind?" she asked with forced perkiness.

"More like recovered it. At least enough to realize that whatever you want from me, it isn't sex."

"You think too much, that always was your problem," she said. "What does it matter? I'm here, I'm willing—"

"It matters to me," he retorted. "I don't need your grudging sex, Glenda. I know what it feels like when somebody really wants me—"

"God's gift to women," she smirked, angry.

"No," he said evenly, "just an ordinary guy—kind of a nerd, in fact. No tight pants, no strut. But amazingly enough, a few women have actually loved me!"

There was a moment's silence. "I'm sorry, Sam," she said, looking abashed—and God help him, he wondered what she was up to *now*. "I was a little insulted, I guess. Of course women have fallen in love with you. I said you were a sweetheart and a sexy man, and I meant it. Your girlfriend's a lucky woman." She paused and gave an irre-

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sistible grin. " 'Course, you didn't seem to be thinking about her a few minutes ago."

He couldn't help laughing. "Nope, can't say I was. You're a persuasive woman, Glenda—no," he said bravely when her hands moved to the belt of her robe again. "Save it for someone you really want."

She looked at him candidly—that is, with the appearance of candor. "You're too nice a guy for me, Sam. Not my type at all, I'm afraid; you're right. I'm a little sorry, though."

"Me too."

Glenda did want a favor. She was going to be out of town tomorrow night, and while Peggy would be "on duty," sleeping here in the tack room, she wondered if Sam could stop in and check on things, just in case. Say around ten P.M.? He assented readily, happy for the opportunity to expiate the guilt he inevitably felt after having denied Glenda something.

The fire was smoking damply again and Glenda poked at it. "Might as well let it go out," she said, her back to him. After a moment she added in a muffled voice, "Funny, this ol' oak blew down two years ago. You wouldn't think it would still be so tough."

Somehow he knew she was thinking about that old bully, braggart, and swindler Barney Cannon.

"Must have been a hell of a tree," he agreed.

8.

In a black mood, he drove away from EastWind. He supposed he was entitled to feel emancipated or triumphant at actually having turned Glenda down. But in fact he was as depressed and disgusted as if he had just left a Bangkok whorehouse—only now he was horny, too.

The whorehouses of Bangkok. He hadn't thought about them in a long time: the dark rooms that smelled of incense and Thai stick; the skinny girls with their curtains of silky black hair. He had only visited them a few times. Guilt, that familiar companion, had overcome even his young-male lust. Not religious guilt—he had left the Baptist church behind, along with his virginity, some years earlier—but every other flavor: racial, national, class. Especially class. It was a new experience; he had been a poor boy all his life, but in Thailand he was a king, and the girls were so damned cheap! A few *bhat,* nothing to him, food and shelter and life to those fourteen-year-olds—

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His train of thought was interrupted by the sight of a pickup pulled off by the break in the rail fence he had noticed Tuesday. A dark-haired man was neatly tacking a new board across it.

Sam stopped and walked over to him. "Mr. Gutierrez?" he guessed.

"Yeah?"

"I'm Sam Cooper, a friend of Glenda Cannon's. I understand you found a break in the fence between her land and the drainage pools."

"Yeah. A new break," he said, stressing the word. "I was just up there two days ago—no matter what she say," he finished resentfully.

"These things happen," Sam said sympathetically. "What was it—a tree limb?"

"Yeah. Oak. Pinned the barbed wire right to the ground."

"An oak?" Sam repeated sharply. "Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. Big ol' branch." He looked at Sam challengingly.

"Okay . . . well, thanks. Thanks a lot." He had walked along the nature preserve boundary for three miles and seen salt cedars, paloverdes, some shrub-sized willows by the ponds—but no oaks. It wasn't the right kind of habitat. So where had that branch come from?

He arrived home and paced restlessly about the house, revved in mind and body. He pulled a dusty bottle of Scotch from the back of a cupboard and drank a little too much. He imagined in detail what he and Claire could do if she were there. Finally, in the grip of acute sexual longing, he swallowed his pride and tried her at her mother's in western Massachusetts. But she had left for the Cape.

Tires squealed as he took the curves on 170 too fast for the road, the Valiant, and his level of sobriety. If he had had his shotgun he would have taken out a few road signs, too; hell, if he had to relive teenage traumas he might as well revert to teenage strategies for coping with them.

The world was black except for the stars and the sweep of his headlights, where oak and manzanita gleamed briefly, white and silver, before receding into darkness. He climbed steadily. At about three thousand feet he pulled off into a turnout, cut the engine, and sat breathing hard as if he had run all the way. After a moment he got out of the car and crouched by the edge of the canyon, peering down into the void, listening to the roar of the invisible river below.

It was cold. Above Slate Mountain to the east the stars had the hard glitter of winter. He pulled a windbreaker and the bottle of

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scotch from the car and returned to the ledge, and presently the stars, and the night air—thin but high octane—and the sound of the river began to calm him, as they had for thirty-odd years. For the first time in hours he was able to think about what had happened that afternoon.

He had been remembering something as he was driving away from Glenda's. Oh yes, Bangkok, the whorehouses of Bangkok . . .

Well, Glenda might possibly be a whore. But she sure as hell wasn't a cheap whore. What currency would she have demanded from him?

His silence, perhaps?

The more he considered, the more certain he was. Looking back, he could see that it was his suspicions that had prompted the historic invitation to step into her tack room. Glenda didn't want to pursue the poisoning of her animals; she didn't want him to assay the locoweed. She wanted the whole subject dropped.

Why? Why was she so adamant that the selenium poisoning was accidental? Was it really to protect Eddie? Sleeping with one man was a strange way to manifest love for another, though there were precedents.

But there was something else nagging at the back of his mind. Earlier that afternoon—it seemed like days ago—he had been unable to imagine a financial motive for poisoning the horses. Well, what about—insurance? What if Glenda was only covered for accidental death or injury to her animals? His insistence that they had been deliberately killed would prevent her from collecting.

Was he suggesting, then, that she had killed her own horses?

No. Impossible.

But she certainly might have grasped the opportunity to collect insurance after someone else had killed them; sentiment might not prevent that, and it would explain why she was bent on damping, by any means at her command, Sam's scientific zeal.

It made sense. Still—who had killed the horses, and why? And did Glenda know? Lord help the killer if she did, because money or no, she wouldn't let their murder pass. Somehow she would take revenge.

At nine-thirty on Saturday night Sam started for Glenda's, then paused on the front porch. He turned back into the living room. He opened the bottom drawer of his desk, pulled out his .45 revolver, and loaded it. He stuck it in the pocket of his jacket, where it swung

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awkwardly with every step, like a bowling ball in a pillowcase. Then he took Claire's keys from the mantel, walked out to the Toyota, and drove to EastWind.

There was light coming from the tack room window when he pulled up to EastWind, but inside the stables it was dark and the smell was overpowering; he could feel his mucous membranes swell and itch as he walked down the row of stalls.

"Peggy?" he called, rapping softly at the tack room door. No answer. He pushed open the door a few inches.

A tiny television in the corner flickered and crackled to itself. Peggy was asleep on the cot, right arm doubled under her, left arm dangling towards the floor; it was a posture of such profound exhaustion that Sam felt uneasy. Could someone sleep with her head twisted like that? Should he wake her? He would scare the hell out of her—not to mention the fact that she might deck him. This was a tough little girl.

Nevertheless, he moved to the cot. "Peggy!" he said again, bending and nudging her lightly. Then he lifted her left arm and let it fall limply. She was completely out.

No smell of alcohol; a sleeping pill, maybe? But she was supposed to be on guard, more or less, and somehow he knew she would take her promise to Glenda very seriously. Abstractedly he leaned across her to switch off the TV.

It was then he saw the red, swollen mark on her jaw.

Cursing under his breath, he strode to the door and flipped off the light. Then he stood nervously listening to the sounds around him: the horses nickering and stamping restlessly, a dog barking somewhere, his own heart pounding. He stifled a sneeze, and in the midst of that intercranial explosion thought he heard a footstep. It wasn't repeated. After five minutes, he fished his revolver from his pocket and slowly opened the door.

Some vestigial sense detected movement his conscious mind didn't—otherwise there would have been one highly coveted office vacant at the Citrus Cove Agricultural Research Station. He lurched violently backwards and to his left and the blow landed on his right forearm instead of his head. But it was bad enough: the gun flew from his hand, he cried out in pain and fell to his knees.

His hindbrain was in complete control now. He rolled to his left and staggered to his feet as if coming up with a long drive to center field, and heard the vicious thwack of a shovel or rake hitting the floor where he had just been. With the horses neighing in alarm

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behind him, he lunged towards the open door at the end of the barn, agonizingly aware that he was silhouetted against the diffuse light of the night sky, expecting every second the crack of a shot and the searing pain between his shoulder blades. Somehow he reached the doorway, tore around the corner, and collapsed against the rough wood siding, gasping for breath.

Picking up a rock to defend himself, however feebly—his right arm was still completely useless—he waited. But no attack came. Presently he realized with a little shock that *he* now held the strategic advantage: for all the man in the barn knew, he was still armed and fully functional and lying in wait for an incautious move.

He smiled sardonically. Yeah, he was one dangerous dude all right, and now he was going to scuttle to his car and get the hell out of here. No horse, not even Glenda Cannon's horse—not even Glenda Cannon's gratitude—was worth this throbbing in his arm. This guy could split or go on with his work, depending on his zeal; it was all the same to Sam. He would just drive away and bring back Tom, and somebody to have a look at Peggy—

Peggy. Damnation.

Maybe she was just knocked out; maybe she was drugged; in any case, she was completely helpless. Could he leave her here?

He began to jog down the drive towards the Toyota and nearly fainted from the impact. Holding his arm against his side, he slowed to an ungainly lope, reached the car, opened the door, slammed it vehemently, gunned the motor, and took off, spinning out in the loose gravel. He wanted this fellow to know exactly what he was doing.

And "this fellow," he felt sure, was Eddie Froelich.

Once out on the road, he tried rotating his wrist and drew in his breath sharply, as unnerved by the sound, a faint creaking, like trees rubbing together in the wind, as by the pain. Something was definitely broken, and under the circumstances it was tempting to just keep on going to the county sheriff's office. After a half-mile he pulled off beside the Parkerville Water District sign.

He stared at its luminous letters as if one of the Commandments had just appeared, written in rivets on a bullet-riddled road sign. He looked at it for a long time, forgetting his pain.

Then he eased himself out of the car and rummaged through the trunk, coming up with the top to Claire's bathing suit, which made a serviceable sling, a flashlight, and a jack handle. He started back towards Glenda's.

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The horses were quiet when he crept up to the barn door, as though the intruding biped had left. But when Sam cautiously poked his head around the corner there he was, smack in the center of the aisle, a black shape coalesced around a beam of light. After a moment Sam could see that the light was a flashlight he held in his teeth and directed towards his hands, which were assembling some sort of apparatus.

Sam retreated hastily and crouched behind the door again, thinking about his next move. Not planning it—he knew what he had to do—but thinking about it, summoning his nerve. From somewhere close came a sharp, fresh odor, and his outstretched hand brushed a burlap sack, half-filled. He brought up a fistful of sweet-smelling grass. Alfalfa. That's why the horses were quiet; they had been bribed. Something else dangled between his fingers: a long, tough vine with—he squinted in the dim light—compound leaves and, no doubt, irregular flowers and bladder-shaped, two-celled pods. Spotted Loco.

He thought he knew what the man in the barn was fumbling with.

Picking up a piece of gravel from the driveway, he hefted it experimentally. Then he tossed it at the second stall, praying that long hours of practicing left-handed hook shots into the wastebasket at work were finally going to pay off. The pebble landed with a thunk, right on target, and immediately the stallion, what was his name—Barney's Pride—neighed with alarm and began plunging and kicking.

The noise covered his approach until the last moment. Then his prey whirled to his left: a bad decision, as it turned out, since Sam's swing with the tire iron caught him directly in the solar plexus. He grunted and doubled up, momentarily helpless; all according to plan, except that Sam himself nearly blacked out from the pain of the blow. Woozily he shoved his knee into the fellow's back, forcing him to the floor, and felt for a weapon. There, stowed neatly in the back of his belt—more businesslike than a jacket pocket, he noted ruefully—was his own .45. Hurriedly, because his victim's movements were becoming stronger, he patted under arms and along legs. Nothing. If he were real lucky, this guy wasn't carrying anything else; if not, well, there was going to be trouble later.

He sprang up just as an arm reached purposefully around towards him; then he backed away and flipped the light switch with his elbow. "Get up, Dwayne," he said.

Dwayne Patterson straightened slowly and turned to face him.

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His eyes flicked from Sam's face to his right arm, registered what they saw, then moved automatically to the shiny object on the ground beside him.

"Forget the hypodermic," Sam growled, and saw with satisfaction that Patterson looked startled. "Go on into the tack room." He motioned with the gun, hoping he looked more commanding than he felt.

The stallion had quieted, and in the still, heavy air Peggy's breathing was ragged. Sam gestured towards the telephone on the desk and spoke carefully. "I want you to dial a number, push the receiver towards me, and then go sit against the wall."

He watched while Dwayne followed these instructions, expressionless; then he laid down the gun for an instant to cradle the receiver against his shoulder. One ring. He had figured he could get one phone call out of Patterson, and had chosen carefully. But he might have chosen wrong. Two rings. He could feel the sweat on his forehead; if nobody answered he would execute Plan B, which was to make Patterson drive both of them into town. But he doubted he could maintain control in that situation. Three rings . . . four . . .

"Hi," said Tom Martelli's voice. "Tom!" Sam replied with relief, but Tom was still talking. "You have reached the Martelli residence. We're unable to come to—"

Hell! The goddamn machine!

He glanced at Patterson. What had he heard? His face was impassive. Sam started speaking rapidly in what he hoped was a conversational manner, covering the electronic beep which sounded like a Chinese gong in the quiet room.

"Yeah, I'm out here at Glenda Cannon's. With Dwayne Patterson—what?" He paused for Tom's nonexistent interruption, then resumed. "I'll explain when you get here. To EastWind. And better bring some backup." Another pause, then, "Okay. See you soon."

His hand shook as he replaced the receiver. Stage fright. He was no good at this kind of performance, and he thought he detected a sardonic smile on Patterson's face. Maybe he had heard that 120-decibel beep and seen through the ruse immediately.

He looked at his watch. It was ten-fifteen. *If* he got home by ten-thirty, *if* he listened to his machine, *if* he understood Sam's message and its urgency, he could be here by eleven . . .

The adrenaline was ebbing and his arm was throbbing. He tried to relax, setting the revolver casually on the desk and resting his hand on top of it. After all, this wasn't a homicidal maniac he was

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dealing with; this guy had killed a couple of horses, that was all.

Somehow he wasn't comforted. He looked at his watch again. 11:07, and damn! his arm hurt. He began to talk in a rambling, discursive fashion, ignoring Patterson's stony stare.

"Water. That's what it's all about; that's what you need, Dwayne, right? Well, Glenda's land adjoins yours, and I just realized tonight that she's over the line. She's in the Parkerville Irrigation District, not in Westside. So she's got cheap water; you pay a hundred twenty dollars an acre foot and she pays twenty, right? You need this ranch, Dwayne. And Glenda won't sell it.

"And then I thought about the horses. Sure, Eddie Froelich could have poisoned 'em; he knew all about selenium and locoweed. But so did you. Hell, I told you!"

He laughed, but stopped abruptly as the shock waves radiated up his arm. Patterson still watched impassively.

"I guess you figured you'd either scare her out or bankrupt her. You might even have written those letters!" he added, moving the revolver to the edge of the desk. He opened the drawer and glanced down for a moment, looking for aspirin, whiskey, anything to numb himself a little.

Suddenly Peggy moaned and stirred. He looked toward the cot, frowning in concern, as she drew a long, uneven breath. When he turned back again, Dwayne was standing, a tight smile stretched across his face. It took Sam a few seconds to see the small-caliber pistol pointed at his head.

9.

"The difference between you and me, Sam," Patterson said in his relaxed Texas drawl, "is credibility. I never believed you would use that thing," motioning towards the .45, "and I never believed you could hit anything with it left-handed, even if you did. I, on the other hand, am fully prepared to blow your head off. And hers. I know it, and you're about to find out." The gun clicked.

"But Martelli knows you're here! You heard me tell him!"

"Yep. But that's my problem. Stand up."

Sam complied very slowly, wondering what his chances were of scooping up his gun, aiming, and shooting before Dwayne's bullet entered his brain. Nil, he concluded. But it looked like his only chance—

The door of the tack room scraped open behind him.

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He saw Dwayne's eyes widen and felt a brief surge of hope: Martelli!

"What are you doing here?" Patterson demanded. Not Martelli, then; who could it possibly—

"I came to see what was taking so long," said a husky voice.

Glenda's voice.

Sam whirled. "Glenda," he yelled, in a stupid, abortive attempt to warn her—and then he took in what she had said.

"Get over here," Patterson growled. She walked slowly past Sam, not looking at him until she reached Patterson. Then she turned and faced him. Dwayne grabbed her in a kind of chokehold, left forearm across her throat as if holding her hostage, and for a moment Sam thought he had misunderstood her after all. Then she settled back against Patterson's bulky body with a small proud smile.

Glenda and *Dwayne?*

Listen, sucker, Glenda's never alone.

But Dwayne *Patterson?* He was fat, and old—old enough to be her father!

And she really missed her father.

"Bastard got away," Patterson grunted.

"Got away?" echoed Glenda. "What's he doing here, then?"

"He came back."

She looked curiously at Sam, who was dizzy with pain and incomprehension. "Peggy," he mumbled in answer to her unspoken question.

"Peggy!" She shook her head disbelievingly. "Poor Sam. Sucker to the last."

Ignoring that chilling *to the last,* he made a real effort to pull himself together. "I don't understand, Glenda. You were killing your own horses?"

"Just the two," she said unhappily. "It was Dwayne's idea, it was the only way. We were going to merge the ranches, but we needed capital—"

"The insurance money," Sam broke in, and she nodded. "And the deaths had to be accidental for you to collect, and I was about to screw that up." She nodded again. "But *why,* Glenda," he burst out, "why did you involve me in the first place? Was it pure malice? What had I ever done to you?"

"It was nothing personal, Sam," she said reprovingly. "It was the letters from Eddie, just like I said. He knew I was seeing somebody,

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though he didn't know who, and Dwayne and I were afraid he was going to make trouble while we were trying to pull this thing off—"

"Shut up," Patterson interrupted curtly. "I got to figure this out."

"Figure out how you're going to murder me and explain it to Tom Martelli when he shows up?" Sam said a little shakily. "That's some mighty heavy figurin' . . . fact is, it can't be done!"

Unmoved, Patterson eyed him speculatively. Deciding where to put the bullet, probably; he would dispatch him as coolly as he would a sickly calf. Glenda was his only chance; out of some glimmer of genuine affection for him—or, barring that, a desire to save her own skin—she might listen.

He took a deep breath and said, "Give it up, Glenda. Quit while you can. There's a big difference between insurance fraud and murder. You want to be in prison for the rest of your life?"

Glenda looked troubled. "Honey . . ." she began uncertainly.

"Sugar, I can still make this work!" Patterson said fiercely. Without moving his eyes from Sam, he shifted his arm down to Glenda's ribcage, just below her breasts, and gathered her against him. "We can't stop now! You got to believe in me!" Despairingly, Sam felt the power of his personality, saw Glenda's face harden again.

"All right. But how . . . ?"

"Okay, we can't have him and Peggy shoot each other, like we figured first. But listen to this. Last night in the tack room—"

"Nothing happened last night, I told you," she said impatiently.

"*Listen* to me!" he said. "Something *did* happen. He came here and tried to force himself on you, and you . . . you finally let him, because you felt sorry for him and you figured it was the easiest way to get rid of him. That's believable; you told me he's had the hots for you since high school."

Sam flushed. "And then he came back tonight," Patterson continued, "and found me here, and came after me in . . . in a fit of jealous rage—" He laughed, jazzed by his own invention.

"But why would he have called the police?"

"Because of the letters!" he finished triumphantly. "He convinced himself I had sent the anonymous letters and that I was here to threaten you—and when he realized it wasn't that way at all, and that I was your lover, and that you didn't have any feeling for him, well, he went berserk and attacked me, and we struggled for the gun . . ."

Where did he *get* this stuff? It was like a bad episode of a rotten

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TV show—and yet, in Sam's panicked state, it sounded terrifyingly plausible.

"What about her?" Glenda was saying, indicating Peggy.

Patterson considered her for a moment. "Stray bullet," he replied briefly, and then turned back to Sam. "Now move over here." He motioned with the gun.

Oh, sure, move into close range so the "struggle for the gun" would be credible. "Not a chance," he replied, and then suddenly, overcome by sheer frustration, he exclaimed, "Dwayne, this is crazy! Killing two people over a couple of horses?"

"It ain't just a couple of horses. I'm in deeper'n that. I got nothing to lose."

Nothing to lose. Sam thought of how much he himself had to lose; he felt the weight of it, the pull of his life, as he looked at Patterson's hard eyes. He was afraid.

And out of fear came inspiration. Glenda was indifferent to his fate, she was too much in love with Patterson to protect herself; okay. But there was one thing she did care about.

"Glenda," he said feverishly, "did you say it was just the two horses? You weren't going to kill any more?"

"That's right," she replied, puzzled.

"Then what was Dwayne doing with the hypodermic?"

She pulled away from Patterson and looked at him questioningly. Evidently she found some kind of answer, because she struck her fist sharply against her thigh.

"No! No more! You promised, Dwayne!" Then her eyes widened in horror. "Not the stallion," she whispered. "Not Barney's Pride."

"We need the money, Glenda," Dwayne said coldly. "You said yourself he was past his prime."

"You BASTARD!" she shouted, twisting away from his grip and rushing towards the door.

"Glenda, I didn't touch him!" Patterson yelled—and Sam dropped on all fours below the big oak desk.

Immediately a shot splintered the wall behind him, followed by another, whining like a dentist's drill as it careened off a brass table lamp. Then an interminable silence, while Sam wondered desperately what would be next: himself, crouched heroically in fetal position, plugged right between the eyes? Peggy, falling prey to the "stray bullet"? Should he fish for the gun on top of the de—

The next instant there was a mind-shattering explosion of simultaneous noises: the sharp crack of a pistol, the crash of glass high

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overhead, the door slamming against the wall, shouts, more gunshots, a scream of pain. Then it was quiet.

Sam opened his eyes to see Tom Martelli, Enrique Santiago, and two other uniformed men, feet planted wide, guns trained on a target across the room. Glenda was standing in the doorway with both hands pressed against her mouth. He struggled to his feet and stood swaying slightly, looking at Dwayne Patterson crumpled against the wall.

10.

"Thank God for answering machines," Sam said. The paramedics had labored over Patterson, who was seriously but not fatally injured, and had moved on to Peggy, who had a concussion. His turn would come, but in the meantime he'd discovered part of a bottle of tequila in the back of a drawer and was feeling a whole lot better. "When'd you get my message?"

"What message?" asked Tom distractedly; he was reading over Sam's statement.

"The one I left on your machine about an hour ago," replied Sam, bewildered.

"Never got it. What did it say?"

"Wait a minute. Why are you here if you didn't hear the message?"

Tom finally looked up. "To question Dwayne Patterson regarding the murder of a loan shark in Houston."

Sam stared at him, dumbfounded. "Patterson killed a loan shark in Houston?"

"Actually, I don't think so. They're just investigatin' everybody who was in pretty deep to this fella, and Dwayne's name came up. People who owed this guy had an unfortunate tendency to disappear."

Windfall in Texas . . . I'm in deeper'n that . . .

"He wasn't at his ranch," Tom was saying, "but his wife told us to try here. Guess she knew about him and Glenda."

They were both silent for a moment. "Jesus," Sam said suddenly, shaking his head.

"What?"

"I was just thinking—I never would have come back to the barn, knowing what I now know about Dwayne Patterson. Peggy or no Peggy!"

Tom looked at him sceptically. "Sure you would have," he said flatly. "You're a smart guy, Sam, but you're a born sucker."

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Sucker to the last. Not a bad epitaph.

Claire forced herself to gaze with simulated interest at the brown and blue relief map below. An experienced and usually nerveless flyer, she was in a frenzy of impatience for the flight to end, and obsessed by visions of flaming doom. They would crash, this random collection of crying babies and businessmen and students and smiling flight attendants and microbiologists; strangers united in death, they would be obliterated to charred body parts strewn for miles across the desert; they would crash, and her final contact with Sam would have been last night's brusque telephone conversation: "Flight four forty-five." "I'll be there."

With agonizing slowness they crept across deserts and mountains; then suddenly the basin below was filled with an impenetrable brown soup. "Air looks pretty good in L.A. today," the pilot said imperturbably as they dropped down into it.

She walked briskly up the ramp with heart unaccountably pounding, searching the waiting crowd for Sam's face. When she didn't see it she first thought, crazily, that she had somehow forgotten what he looked like, and began to construct a mental image. Tall and thin with dark hair, right?

No. He definitely wasn't there.

Sagging with disappointment and worry and irrational anger, she made her way to the baggage area and waited. And waited.

"Claire!" someone said breathlessly behind her, and she turned to see a tall, thin, dark-haired stranger whose smile faded as he beheld her blank countenance. "Sorry I'm late," he said in a familiar-sounding voice. "The Valiant overheated coming up the Grapevine."

"The Valiant?" she heard herself say. "Why didn't you bring the Toyota?"

"Because I can't shift!" he answered plaintively, and she saw that his right arm was in a sling.

"Sam!" So this must be Sam. "What happened?" She reached out tentatively to touch his shoulder. Then her bags arrived, and they fought their way to the parking lot. Despite his protests that the Valiant was easy to maneuver one-handed, she insisted on driving. "It's sorta pulling to the left," he said apologetically—a phenomenon she never got to experience, since as soon as they left the airport they were stopped dead by rush-hour traffic.

How high did your blood pressure have to rise before you had a stroke? she wondered, as they sat, silent, gridlocked, two blocks from the airport. "What happened to your arm?"

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"It's a complicated story," he said, and that was all he said. She could see he was hurt by her coldness. She didn't blame him. She didn't want to be cold, she didn't even know why she was cold—well, numb was a more exact description—except that everything seemed so alien: the murky air, the extraterrestrial palm trees, the ocean on the left instead of the right . . . and why couldn't she simply explain this to Sam?

Instead she asked inanely, "Is that a new shirt?" It was Western-style, with pointy pocket flaps and snaps instead of buttons.

"No. I just never wear it."

"It's nice."

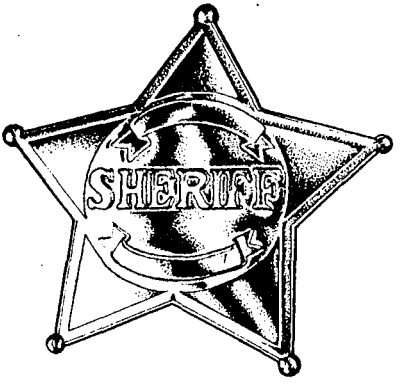
It *was* nice. And Sam himself was beginning to come into focus. And if she spent one more second sitting on her behind in a vehicle she was going to explode.

Leaning on the horn like a New York cabdriver, she forced her way into the rightmost lane and then, oblivious to Sam's protests, drove along the shoulder for a few hundred yards, finally turning into the driveway of the airport Hilton.

She came to an abrupt halt in front of the motel office.

"It . . . it's a long way to Riverdale," she said, staring intently at the steering wheel. "And we might be stuck in traffic for hours, or the damn car might overheat again, or we might have an accident, or . . ."

She broke off. Sam was grinning like a fool. He put his good arm around her neck, and she grasped the lapels of his shirt and pulled them apart. The snaps made a wonderful popping sound.



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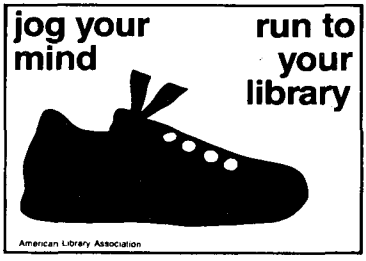

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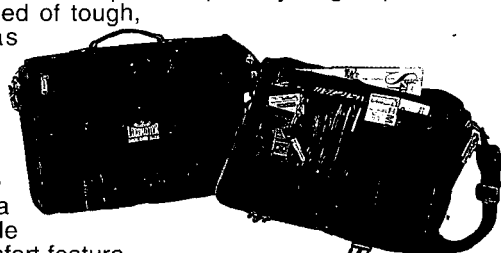

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